

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 13, 2015

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One of our Godly Play stories in Sunday school begins: "There was once someone who said such amazing things and did such wonderful things that people followed him. They couldn't help it. They wanted to know who he was..." Now Jesus is heading for Jerusalem. He has a pretty good idea that he will be arrested there and probably put to death. He is worried, and looking back over his short ministry he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others one of the prophets." They are close but they do not yet see. So Jesus asks his own disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." That was truth. But it was generally agreed in that day that the Messiah would exercise his work through brute force and make his people a world power. Jesus orders his followers to be quiet about that. Then, he gives his own answer. He is the Son of Man, he says. It is a reference to the Book of Daniel written at a time of great persecution. Instead of brute force, he teaches them that the work of the Son of Man would mean suffering and conflict with the powers that be. To imagine Jesus suffering and rejected and killed is too much for Peter. He is overcome with his own anxiety and reacts by rebuking Jesus. Peter, like us, is capable of speaking truth at one moment and with a slip of the tongue is capable of injury and rebuke the next. "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing," James observes. Finally, in the sorrow after Jesus' death Mary Magdalene is crying alone outside the tomb. Someone, she supposes the gardener, comes alongside of her. He asks, "Woman, why are you weeping?" After she answers him, the stranger simply calls her name, "Mary." With that she turns and tells who the risen Christ is to her, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher)." We have had a number of responses to our desire for knowing who this person is who said such amazing things and

did such wonderful things that people followed him. I want to take a few moments to reflect upon Mary's answer, "Teacher."

This month children have returned to school, and we have entrusted them to their teachers. Isaiah said, "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." What if Peter had been able to contain his anxiety and instead of rebuking Jesus given him a word that could sustain his weary heart? That's the tongue of a teacher. I remember once not having turned in a math assignment. The teacher asked why I had not done the work as assigned. I answered, "I'm lazy I guess." He replied, "No, you're not." He would not let me define myself by a failed assignment – the tongue of a teacher. From teachers I have received words of encouragement, examples of scholarship, support when I got in over my head. From a college professor when I shared my interest in life's meaning, he guided me toward theology. We all have stories of teachers who have given a welcome word of sustenance. I tell our Sunday school teachers here at Saint Paul's that one of the most important things we do in all of our church is to teach children the stories, values and lessons of our faith. That learning of course continues all our lives into adulthood. Our faith is so deep we never exhaust it.

As we do at Saint Paul's, the Letter of James ranks teachers among the most important of ministries. Unlike apostles and prophets who were itinerant, teachers stayed in place. They were given the care of shaping the church, instructing children and adults in the Christian faith. It was the teacher's responsibility to share their own self-awareness as well as the gospel stories to those who were entering the church.

James also says teaching is tricky because it uses the instrument of the tongue. First of all, he says, "all of us make many mistakes." We can make a slip of the tongue when we are off our guard. Our prejudices (and we all have them) slip out. We contradict our words by our actions. Using words is hard. We need to keep them in check like the bridle that guides a horse's movement. Some of the ways we do that is speaking directly to the person with whom we have a concern, not venting about it with third parties. Venting avoids responsibility for the accuracy of what is said. We can just let it fly! Better to

speak directly and as honestly as we can. We guide our words by not carrying a message from one person to another. That's like the old telephone game. The words change the more they are repeated down the line. We guide our words by not taking anonymous communication seriously. And finally we guide our words by not talking about a situation with another when they will not address the matter themselves head on. A misdirected word to a third party can set a fire ablaze, James teaches. Someone described a valley like dog. If you step on one end it barks at the other. The same is true with community. Words travel and we need to use them with care.

James then asks about taming the tongue. Exasperated, he says, it can't be done. Not by us anyway. He asks us to look at the creation story. God blessed humankind and gave them dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air" (Gen. 1: 28). Dominion means to render creatures useful to God's purpose for the world, for healing and wellbeing. We can tame "every species of beast and bird," James says, but no one can tame the tongue. Here we need God's help. When we are in distress Jesus points us to the Holy Spirit who will give us the words we need (Mk. 13:11). We tame the tongue by letting God help bear our anxiety so that we do not need to react and rebuke as Peter did. We listen to God's words at creation, "And it was very good," to see the best in others and ourselves. Finally, when we serve the Spirit we set our mind on divine things. Paul says, "those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit," and the mind that is set on the Spirit finds life and peace (Rom. 8: 5-6). That was Jesus' problem with Peter. His mind was set "not on divine things but on human things." Therefore instead of life and peace he was acting out of fear and insecurity. We need to bring God into our lives to tame our words.

So who is this person who said such amazing things? There are many answers. Mary's, "Rabbouni" which means teacher is one of my favorites. Jesus is the Teacher who changes the meaning of Messiah from brute power to the vulnerability and suffering service of the Son of Man. His teaching is carved upon our altar: "those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake... will save it." Sometimes we put all our energy into saving our lives, trying to make ourselves invulnerable to change

and chance. Then we are unable to identify with the concern and distress of another. Without vulnerability we are unable to love; and we lose the ability to fully live. But when we lose our lives, when we risk being vulnerable, when we risk identifying with the suffering of others, when we see the goodness in others even when they do not see it in themselves, then we are really living. This is Jesus' lesson. He teaches it to us; and as his followers we become teachers to others – with all the importance and trickiness that that entails. To teach we need the tongue, and to tame the tongue we need our God. Then, like Isaiah whom God made a teacher, we too can “sustain the weary with a word.”

Amen.