

“Deny Ourselves?”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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James 3:1-2

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member; yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father; and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to You and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that the Spirit that lives within us would do its work. That it would take the words and images that we have right now, the worries, the thoughts, the concerns, the joys, the celebrations, I pray that it would take the words we've offered from Scripture, the words we sing in song and say in prayer, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. May the Spirit touch, bless, and transform all of those words so that the Living Word of Jesus Christ would be at center among us. That it would continue to grow within us. That it would continue to feed us and challenge us and encourage us. That it would continue to call to forgive, to offer grace. But most of all, that it would be at work through us into this world, that in too many ways, desperately needs Your goodness. May we be faithful followers of Christ. For it is in His name that we pray. Amen.

So I get up pretty early on Sunday mornings and one of the things that I do first is I peruse the newspapers to see if there are any headlines that I need to pay attention to. And other than Florence, which was an obvious one, every now and then something captures my attention. And one that I saw today in the Washington Post said that Jamie Dimon, the head of JP Morgan, had criticized the president a week ago and now he's backing away from what he said. In essence, he's trying to say, "Oops, I shouldn't have done that." And he wants to have a do-over. Any of you ever hit send too soon on an email or have a conversation with a spouse or a child and say something and the minute it comes out, you're like, "Oh, I can't grab it"? In essence, we all want do-overs because every now and then, we say or do things that we wish we hadn't. According to the reading that Karen offered from James, the tongue of ours is like a rudder that can steer a big ship. It doesn't take very much to have the entire ship run aground. We can say one word, often, and ignite those that we love. It's said in James that we do bless and curse with the same tongue. Sometimes, we transform ourselves in Jekyll and Hyde fashion from someone, who at one moment in life, can be loving and gentle and kind, and who in another moment can be absolutely furious. It's us. We're human. And I think that because we're human, we spend a lot of time in church talking about grace and forgiveness and mercy. But what I want to do today is talk about how we might let the tongue of ours pile up more blessings than curses. How we might live our lives in a way that offers more blessings to other people than judgment or scorn or ridicule, or whatever else we might cast upon our neighbors especially those that are in need. For us, it's easy to look upon them and think, "Oh, if they had only done that one, or two, or three things differently, then everything else would have worked out." That may or may not be the case. But our job is to not judge. Our job, if we listen to James, is to become more of a blessed people so that we could bless others through our giving, through our actions, and through our words. Now, I come to this also with having been in Philadelphia for a week, meeting with an author who wrote the book that we're going to do in book group on Wednesday, having a chance to sit down with him and talk to him about different things in the spiritual life. I also met with a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who does positive psychology, talked to him about things--how we might live a-- and all of these conversations are coming together with last week's sermon and everything about having our tongue be a blessing when I laid out the formula last week that faith plus works equals wholeness for ourselves and for our communities. Faith plus work equals wholeness for ourselves and for our community. In essence, it's the prayer that I pray every time before I preach. I pray that the Spirit works through us in order that the presence of Christ would be more visible in all of us, that the love of God would be more tangible in us, that we wouldn't be so worried about the cares or concerns of the world.

But I've been playing with this. Again, I had a lot of time to myself in a hotel room the size of this piece of paper in Philadelphia with no view because they stuck me on the second floor so I had a nice view of the alley. And so I thought, "Well, I'm going to work on my sermon." So I got out my computer and I remembered the equation. And then I thought, "Well, wait a minute. If we take this passage from Mark where Jesus says that you've got to lay down your life and if you don't lay down your life, you're going to lose it. But if you lose it, you're going to find it. And you got to pick up your cross, and carry it, and follow me, and all these things about denying yourself." As I brought that to the equation, I thought, "Wait a second. It's not just faith and works equals wholeness. There's something richer in the first part about faith. There's faith, and wisdom, and knowledge that we, as Christians, need to incorporate into our being in order to allow our tongues to be more blessing-oriented than judging, or cursing, or complaining" Whatever the word is, how do we use our facility, our tongues, our ability to speak in order to be more of a blessing. And again, I don't know if I've totally conglomerated these things together, but I think Jesus is getting at it when he says you need to take up your cross and follow me.

Now, when those words come out of my mouth at least I visualize usually a gentleman carrying a couple 4x4s that he's configured together, an 8-foot section and about a 12-foot section tied together with rope, right, when they come together. And he's dragging it down the street. That was the image up on the screen of someone kind of schlepping this cross down a road. That is not what Jesus is telling us. Jesus is not

telling you that you need to literally take up a cross and follow Him. What He's saying is that you need to realize that you are not in charge. That God is actually in charge. And that if you can lay down your illusion of being in charge, you can learn things, you can follow Jesus, you can be a student of Jesus. But only if you're willing to lay down the illusion of your control in life. This is what He means when He says, "If you want to save your life you have to lose it. And if you lose it for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, you'll save it." He's talking about your life, your soul, your heart, your way of seeing the world. It's bigger than just the literal "carry a cross down the highway or lose your life." Because what He's trying to get us to understand is that God is God and we are not. And sometimes, especially for us, it's difficult to realize that. Who decided what you would eat for breakfast this morning? Who decided what you would do today? What time you would come to church? Who decides where you're going to go have lunch? Who decides who you're going to go have lunch with? On and on and on, we get asked questions in life where we say that we are going to decide those things. But every now and then, we realize we are not in charge. Anybody here have a body that feels different than how they want it to? Guess what? You are not in charge. Anybody here lead the National Disaster Response for the Presbyterian Church and when you retired, you retired to New Bern, North Carolina because it's a beautiful spot near the water? In North Carolina, the cost of living is cheap. And now, you've got 12 feet of water in your home? You are not in charge.

As I look out, I know that many of you know this. You've lost loved ones or spouses. You've been in the hospital with cancer. You're being treated now. Time and time and time again, we are told through our lives that we are not in charge. But what Jesus is offering us is the opportunity to appreciate that without having to go through all those horrible things. And I think that what He's trying to get us to understand is that the way to do this, the way to pick up your cross and to carry it and to follow Him is through prayer. For those who want to have a whole and rich life, heart, soul, psyche, you got to let it settle a bit you got to let it not be center stage. You got to move it aside so that my life and the life of the gospel, the life that will give you wholeness, that will save you, that will rescue you, that will keep you, that will nurture you, that will encourage you, that will give you hope. Give you peace, give you grace. So that life can rise up within you. And I just want to give you a very concrete way of doing that. It's a way of the ancient church that we don't talk about much anymore. But it's making a comeback. And it's the way of contemplation. It's a way of sitting in God's presence and just offering yourself to whatever comes.

By doing so, you're able to nail your worries and your fears and your concerns to the cross of Christ. And like Christ on the cross, they can die. And like Christ, they can be transformed in the grave and rise again to new life if we're willing to spend time carrying our cross and following Jesus. If we're willing to spend time in prayer. Rowan Williams who was formerly the Arch Bishop of Canterbury wrote that contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do. It is the key to prayer, to liturgy, to art, to ethics. It is the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom. Freedom from self-orientation. Freedom from acquisitive habits - I need to get - and freedom from the distorted understanding that comes from them.

To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. Rowan Williams believes in contemplative prayer. So I'm going to teach you how to do it. You sit in a chair. You get comfortable. You close your eyes. You breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth three times. And then you just let your breath settle within you. And if a thought comes to you, you offer it to God. And in that offering, God will do God's work and transform it.

When you've done something that you wish you could do over. You've said something harmful or you forgot to do something, rather than beating yourself up, just offer it to God gently. And allow the spirit to transform what you thought was a mistake into a moment of learning and acquiring deeper wisdom. If we take our suffering, our worry, our fear, all of those things that hold us back from loving our neighbor and nail them to the cross in prayer, God will continue to do amazing things within us and through us and to the

neighbors that we love and care about. So don't be afraid to sit in silence or to sit still and be mindful of God's loving presence for you and for the world. Amen.