

## **“The Power of the Word, the Power of Our Words”**

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**Sunday, September 13, 2015  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings from Scripture: Mark 8:27-38 and James 3:1-12**

*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.”*

*Mark 8:27-38*

*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. (This is quite a passage!) 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.*

*James 3:1-12*

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us your word, the living word, and as together we reflect and discern on the words offered this day may we grow in faith, may we listen and hear. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago the passage from James focused on the importance of acting out our faith as well as talking about our faith, about the connection between words and actions. In this morning's reading, though, James is returning to focus on words. But here he is not talking about the good news, he is talking about what we say in our every day lives and how it matters. That while words about the Word with a capital W matter, words with a small w matter, too. He says that for such a little part of the body the tongue has great power.--"How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire." He reminds us about the power and the impact of words and that as individuals the more power we have, whether as parents or bosses or leaders, even a few words said with malice can leave long-lasting hurts and impressions.

This week a friend of mine shared the story of when she was a young child in school. She was in fourth grade. She worked very hard with a tutor to write a paper. She said, "I worked on it, wrote it and rewrote it and rewrote it again and she said the day I brought it to school, I was so excited. And I brought it up to the teacher and she looked at it and after a couple of minutes she said, 'You couldn't have written this' and she tore it up in front of the class." And here we were 60 years later and she still remembers. It brought tears to my eyes. The reality is our words have power.

James is concerned because those to whom he writes are struggling. There are tensions going on in the faith community and he knows that words that are not said with grace or wisdom can make a difficult atmosphere even more tense. And those words seem particularly appropriate today. We only need to watch the news and to see the little clips of how people talk to and about one another in ways that just simply amaze me. It's true of social media as well. Sometimes when I read the comments below an article or something someone has written in a blog, I am absolutely amazed that people would feel free to say and write what they do. And maybe in part it's because they don't have to look in the eyes of the person—I'm not sure.

One scholar said "that with our words we name the world and each other, and in some sense create a reality. Once our speech and narratives take hold, they have great power whether for good or evil. They can exclude or embrace. They can heal or humiliate. They can lift up or tear down. How many of us remember something that a parent said to us over and over again that really hurt. Or a compliment made by a teacher that helped us even though it was many years ago." **1** James talks about how when we let our words get the best of us, they reveal our less than kind hearts and they remind us that we are to think before we speak, to consider well what we are going to say, especially if we are angry or fearful. He says we can challenge but with wisdom and kindness. We are to admonish in ways that build up not tear down confidence. I think if we're honest, many of us would say there are times when we struggle. We come home tired and cranky and take it out on our children, our spouse, we feel tense about something that's going on at another place and we feel threatened and so we take it out on others. It's a difficult challenge day by day.

The Gospel reading from Mark struck me as a strange parallel to James' reading. I have a theory that sometimes when those who put the lectionary together, had just come back after lunch and they were tired and needed to take a nap, because sometimes the readings just don't match. This is an interesting passage about Jesus and the disciples. They have been traveling together and they move along in their ministry and they hear people talking about Jesus. And Jesus says to his disciples, "Who

do they think I am?" They say, "John the Baptist" or they name other prophets. And then Jesus says "Who do you think I am?" And they talk about him in a way about a Messiah who will come and everything will be wonderful. But then Jesus tells them what is going to happen—that he will suffer and die and things start to go sideways. They don't want to believe that he will die. They don't want to believe that he will leave them. And so they argue and they challenge him, and Jesus appears to erupt and speak very sharply to Peter. He goes on to tell them that his role and message will be challenged and challenging, that his role is not to be one that comes with great power and glory, but of serving and suffering and hard work and that they are to be those who serve and are not served.

So what's going on? Would James tell Jesus, "You were out of line."? Or is the author of this gospel trying to share another example of the ways in which the disciples struggle and are portrayed as someone unable to understand, so that we, too, in turn can see ourselves as those who sometimes struggle and try to understand. To see whether or not we understand our faith as something very challenging. Is Jesus saying the road he is traveling is not easy? I think so. I also think he wants them to be aware how hard it will be.

I think both of these passages point out that the life of faith is not easy and that faithful behavior does not come to us once we say "I believe." It means that we are continually striving to do better, to serve better, to, in fact, think differently. It's hard work and at different times for different reasons. For some it literally means laying down one's life as our brothers and sisters in other countries are who are persecuted for their faith. But for most of us here, it is about the day-to-day internal struggle to live and act faithfully with compassion, wisdom and constructive challenge in the world—especially a world where people all too easily name-call, label, abuse and intimidate.

When I thought about these two passages, I remembered a story about another James, James Fallon. It is a strange and kind of unsettling story that was played on NPR not too long ago. James Fallon is a neuroscientist and a researcher. He has done a lot of work on the brain. He has worked with many people with mental illnesses, especially those who are sociopaths. He learned that many of them had faced difficult hardships and received little love growing up. Because of that they had a hard time understanding and living in ways that considered the feelings and needs of others. After his time of research, he could look at a brain scan and literally tell if that person's brain scan followed the path of a sociopath or not. So he asked his loved ones to do brain scans and see how they compared and it reconfirmed his thoughts. And then he did his own scan.<sup>2</sup> To his shock he saw that the scan was like those of sociopaths. He just couldn't believe it. He said, "I've never hurt anyone. I've never done anything violent." But he was a researcher and he went to ask those closest to him about this. He said, "Isn't this strange? Look what this came up with."

So imagine his shock when they said, "No, we can see what that would be about. Your behavior can be quite manipulative. You can be quite self-serving. You can be quite difficult and controlling." His daughter said, "Look at these two paintings I did of you. One is dark and disturbing, the other full of light. It's like you are two different people sometimes." He said as his family shared the stories and experiences they had had with him, he began to see that they were right. He had tendencies—not ones that were as volatile as many of the sociopaths he worked with, but he knew he was controlling. He knew that they were right when they said "You play word games with us. You always have to be right. You always want your own way and you sometimes don't care how we feel." It really took him aback and he realized he needed to change, to think about what he said and how he said it. Jim said, I love my wife very much and I realized how difficult it must have been for her at times. And so I decided to deliberately examine every action and conversation I had with her, to be less controlling, to be more willing to listen, to do what she wanted. And she appreciated it deeply. But he said it was hard work,

the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and at times I didn't want to do the right thing and wondered how she would feel if she knew that sometimes I didn't do things from the heart but because it was the right thing to do.

I think that James Fallon is an articulate and bright person who was willing to share deeply and honestly about the struggles of his heart. He also realized how fortunate he was. Others had had hard lives and were verbally abused. His parents were loving and kind and responsive. He was the child they had yearned for for so many years. He realized how much nurture can impact nature and that patterns of behavior have power. He said, what if I had been treated differently and felt unloved, would things have turned out differently?

His words are thought provoking. I'm not saying that when we say unkind words we are creating sociopaths. But I am saying that our words have power and the pattern of them has even greater power. The words we speak, the ways we share them can have a great impact and they can shape our lives and the lives of others. James reminds us that we are to work at it day by day. And that when we fail we don't say I give up, we just have to try again. Because it is hard work and takes lots of deliberate practice.

As I reflected on that I thought about the saying that it is easier to act our way into thinking than to think our way into acting. The longer we work at something over time, we can change patterns and change ourselves. I remember after a particularly wild day with my children when they were young, my mother talked about how frustrated she was when my sister and I would run around at bedtime and make it impossible for her to get us to bed so she could get some well-earned time to read the paper. But then she said, "I remembered I wanted to be a mother, I wanted these children and so I learned to let go and just enjoy the two of you driving me crazy, running around chasing each other and laughing with joy." She said, "over time it was easier." She acted her way into another way of being and it helped her to see things differently.

Our words have the power to support or to hurt, to encourage or discourage, to build up or tear down. We are called to be a part of the body of Christ, not just here but in all the places we are, whether at home or at work or in school, and to use our words for hope and challenge and kindness and peace. Let's remember the power and importance of what we say and temper it with loving kindness. Amen.

1 Dan Clenendin, frp, Journey With Jesus "Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak" "Toxic Talk and The Virtue of Silence", 2012 as listed on [Textweek.com](http://Textweek.com) for September 12, 2015.

2 I could not find the verbatim of Fallon's program on NPR, but you can find numerous articles from Huffington Post, CNN and other places.