
James 3:1-12**Mark 8:27-38**

In light of our reading today from the Epistle of James, and in the interest of full disclosure, I wish to come clean about something. I have an incredible talent for sarcasm. I have a brutal wit that can pierce to the soul. I really have to concentrate to read subtext when talking to people, but I know just where to plunge the knife and when to twist it if I want to hurt someone. If there are times that I seem shy or reserved, even a bit stand-offish, I think it is my fear of saying something hurtful without even meaning to do it that keeps me quiet. I have tried to develop a trait of being a good listener so as to bring something positive to my conversations. That being said, I know I let my guard down when it comes to family. The irony is that I say the most hurtful things at times to the ones I love and trust the most. I try not to, but sometimes it just comes out.

While I am not always able to follow St. James' advice about my tongue, I do understand the danger he describes. It is in a similar vein to our Lord's pronouncement from a couple of Sundays back that it is what comes out of the body that defiles us. It is not entirely accurate to say that, unlike sticks and stone, words can never hurt me. We can cause immense hurt with our words. We can wound with our speech. We can bring about incredible harm with what we say.

On the other hand, much as we can control a great ship with a small rudder, if we can keep our tongues under control, the rest will follow. If we can train wild beasts to obey us, can we not control our own tongues? This is the challenge of our reading from the Epistle of James today. The writer gives us some lovely metaphors with which to work. But they are lovely metaphors describing an ugly truth. What we say matters.

The thing is we are not bad people. I can't think of anyone at St. James' who tries to hurt others with what he or she says. If your experience is different, you might want to let me know so we

may deal with it. But my experience has been that folks try to be nice. But that doesn't change the fact that we can inadvertently hurt someone with what we say. It usually happens when we are trying to be witty. That is my personal area of shame. I like to think that I am amusing. Sometimes, though, it doesn't come across that way. So I try to be the kind of person that when I do realize that my words have hurt someone that I take responsibility for it. I don't try to hide behind some lame excuse like "I was only joking." When we hurt someone, it really doesn't matter what our intent was. What matters is that we hurt someone and that we try to reconcile.

Sometimes that is not possible. I have known of folks, some of them priests, who try to say something witty when a person comes back to church after an absence. "Well, look at that, the roof didn't fall in." There is a very good chance that you will not be able to apologize to that person because they will never be back to church again. Whatever the reason a person stopped coming to church, coming back takes a great deal of courage. We should do everything that we can to make that as easy as possible. Let people ease back in at their own pace.

Still, we will misspeak. We will say something without really thinking about how it might be received and hurt someone we didn't mean to. "Well, they shouldn't be so easily offended." - Doesn't matter. As Christians, we are called to care about what others think. We are not in this just for ourselves and our enjoyment. We have a responsibility to respect the dignity of every human being. If someone is offended, they are offended. We don't have the right to say that they are wrong to be offended. We don't have the luxury of defensiveness. "I'm just saying." "Can't you take a joke?" No, our responsibility as Christians is to heal the breach, not act like shouldn't exist.

Sometimes we say things that hurt others because we assume that everyone agrees with our position. This is an especially insidious situation because the person offended will probably also feel that they are outnumbered. "If it were okay for them to say that, then everyone else must think the

same way. I guess I'm the one who doesn't belong." Now, I am not saying that we can't have different views on things; far from it. The beauty of the Episcopal Church is its ability to encompass diversity, but how we express that diversity is important; a bit of humility will go a long way. "I might be wrong, but here is how I see it."

But we don't admire humility and intellectual honesty, do we? We like people who shoot from the hip, say what's on their minds, and never worry about what others will think. "I think this and I don't care what you or anyone else thinks about it." Such people are not to be admired or emulated. Our calling is to love God and our neighbors. We don't do that by not caring about how what we do and say affects others.

Instead, we are to die to self. That is what our Lord means when he tells us that we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. "Bearing ones cross" has come to mean dealing with some burden or other. "Yes, that's the cross I bear." But the cross is not a burden: it is the means of a fundamental change in our relationship with God. Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are reconciled to God. In our baptism, we die to our old life and are born again into a new life in Christ. We are dead to our old selves and alive in Christ.

Instead of speaking our mind and not caring what others think, we are to speak to good news of God in Christ without worrying what others think. We are to proclaim the good news that there is a God, a God who loves and cherishes each one of us; a God who has adopted us as children through the blood of his Son Jesus Christ; a God who commands us to love one another, because love is of God. We should never be ashamed to proclaim the love of God in Christ, even in a world that sees caring for the less fortunate as beneath them, seeking peace instead of war as weakness, striving for the good of all humankind as contemptuous. Yes, in fact, we do think that we can change the world, because it is not us but God in us at work.

Our Lord asked his disciples who they thought he was. "You are the Messiah." - A profound understanding of the truth of the nature of Christ. Do we answer the same way? Is Jesus *our* Messiah? Do we follow and trust in the one who came down from heaven for our sakes? Do we follow the one who fed the hungry, healed the sick, comforted the mourning? Are we following the one who gave himself to death that we might live? Do we believe that Jesus is the Christ? Or are we just saying it? May God grant us the grace to do what we say we believe. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*