

“Risky Wisdom”

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

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/B, September 17, 2006

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I apologize. If you were here last Sunday you heard Rev. Allen and Karen Ziel eloquently and humorously persuade you to consider being a teacher or an assistant with the Children’s Ministry. I should have asked any of you who were seriously considering answering this call to leave before the scripture lessons were read. The gospel lesson was not the problem. We heard in it the familiar invitation to take up your cross and follow Jesus. One way to follow Jesus, of course, is to teach the next generation of believers. It was the stern warning to teachers in James’ letter that may have made you reconsider the notion of ever becoming a teacher.

James frank and candor truth always makes me squirm a bit. However, I also know he has a lot to teach us. His sole concern is that the church learns how to live the commandment to love not only God, but one’s neighbor as well. Loving your neighbor seems simple enough, until we start looking more closely at our contradictory lives.

Today James speaks about the tongue as a powerful tool, used for both good and evil. I find it curious that James begins by addressing teachers. Is self-control harder for them than others? Preachers and teachers have the blessing and burden of passing on knowledge. We can not do what we do without interacting with other people. We must therefore always be mindful of not only what we say, but how we say it. I try to take James’ admonitions seriously. I must be aware of what I say, how I say it, where it is said, to whom it is said, and the affects my words have on other people. This is not only my concern. I share this responsibility with every other disciple.

If you are neither a teacher nor a preacher, you are not off the hook. James speaks here to the whole church, a church struggling to live the commandment to love one another. Thus far in James letter, he points out instances of hypocrisy that he observes within the early church. When we say we have faith, but do not care for the widows and orphans, what kind of faith are we confessing? If we say we love everyone, but make distinctions about people based on wealth, who are we really fooling? It is hypocrisy when our speech and our actions are not in sync. When we show favoritism to the rich and send the poor away empty, we are lying not only to ourselves, but to God as well. We don’t have to say anything to participate in hypocrisy. If our bulletin says everyone is welcome and we glance at a visitor who is not “properly” dressed that gives them the feeling they do not belong here, we have not been faithful to the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

It is not only the problem of our speech and actions not being in sync. It is also hypocrisy when our speech is not in sync. This is the problem that James addresses. For example, if we bless God and then curse someone who is created in the image of God, we sin twice. Not only do we wound the one to whom we have cursed; we also wound God because what we say perhaps God has made a mistake. If everyone is made in the image of God and whatever God creates is good, then what happened to the one we have maligned or condemned. How can we bless God one minute and condemn our neighbor or those so and so people that live in Hartford or work in Washington, DC or live in Baghdad with the same breath?

Watch just a few minutes of a press conference with the President and this hypocrisy becomes evident. With one breath he praises a reporter for asking a probing question. Then when the reporter pushes him in a way he does not appreciate, he responds by criticizing this reporter. I understand these are difficult times, however, this is precisely when we need to work even harder to live by the commandment to love one another. I understand the burden the president bears having to always speak in front of millions of people and the hearing what you have said replayed over and over again on the evening news. However, when you profess to be a disciple of Christ, to live by Christian principles, those principles should guide all that you do. It doesn't matter to God if you are the president of the United States or the Associate Minister of the Congregational Church in South Glastonbury. When you profess to follow Jesus you agree to live as Jesus lived, to speak as Jesus spoke, to love your neighbor as Jesus loves us. This is what makes being a Christian so challenging for everyone.

Words are incredibly powerful and not to be taken lightly, in any circumstance. The ability to communicate is a sacred gift from God. After all, it is by the power of the Word that God created the universe. When God said, "let there be..." there was! God spoke it and it came into being...light, seas, earth, creatures, and eventually humans. The Word became flesh to dwell among us. God sent this incarnate Word for our salvation.

Perhaps you have heard this statement. "A mature Christian is one who would not hesitate to sell their talking parrot to the town gossip." I am glad that talking parrot does not live on my dashboard! Even if you had not heard this bit of wisdom before, you know what it means. If I am able to control my tongue, in all my relationships not simply in some of them, then I should have nothing to fear.

How we hear and the way it affects us is not only a psychological issue, but a physiological one as well. I learned that when we hear a word, the sound waves that enters our ear and then the inner ear activate 24,000 little nerves, which react through the limbic system and results in the pituitary gland

sending hormones into the body. Our whole physical system reacts when we hear words of care or condemnation. When we hear words that bring us pain or anxiety, the physical-chemical reactions take 72 hours to subside. Just imagine the effect just one harsh word each day has on the mental health of a person.

We know how important speech is to our psychological and spiritual development. There are many situations when we are either evaluated or judged. Perhaps in your work life you undergo an annual review. When you are a performer your work is constantly judged and evaluated. That supervisor or music teacher may say five affirming things about your work, however, it is the one or two critical things that stick with us. That is not to say these words of critique are not accurate or shared with the greatest of hope and compassion, but they linger and haunt us long after the praise

It is critical that as Disciples of Christ, we think seriously about what we say and how we say it. We can not control what happens to people when they are away from church. However, we have full control over how we act and treat one another while we are here. That does not mean that we act a certain way here and forget how to act when we are not here. That too would be hypocrisy. How we speak to each other, how we speak to the ones we love and how we speak to and about strangers is critical. This does not mean that we are perfect, that we will never lash out at someone we love, that we won't ever speak harshly to a friend, or that we will not speak critically of our elected officials. Perhaps what James says will simply cause us to pause a moment, to take a deep breath, and to consider whether or not we truly need to speak those words. Perhaps there is a way to say it that does not tear down or wound the other. Perhaps there is something I can do that will make the other person think about what they have said or done without resorting to slander, gossip or bashing.

James does not mince words. But if you look carefully with an open mind, you will see that he is right on target. The unbridled tongue, James says, "is set on fire by hell." One preacher invites us to consider this simple three question true or false quiz. What would you say to these three statements?

- I have never hurt another person with my words
- I have never repeated something about another person that I did not know for certain was absolutely true
- I never participate in idle talk about other people and their lives

False, false and false. It is easy to do any one of these things without thinking of the consequences. James does not say these things to scold the early church community or us. He loves the church and longs for us to live together as the body of Christ, loving and caring for each other in all that we do. It is not only what we *do* in the name of Christ, but how we speak to each other, what we say, and the way we say it that builds up the body of Christ.

The story is told of a woman that went to St. Francis of Assisi and asked what she had to do to be forgiven for her gossiping. St. Francis told her to take feathers and place them one at the doorstep of everyone she had spoken ill of in the town. She did so and returned to the wise saint. Francis told her to then go and retrieve all the feathers. When she attempted to do so, they were all gone. By that time the feathers were scattered all around town. Once again, she returned to St. Francis and told him about the feathers. He said to her, “you wish to repent and be forgiven of your sin. Good. But the damage of your words is done and can not be taken back.”

God forgives our sins. Sometimes we must ask forgiveness of those whom we have wounded. How much better it would be if we first took the time to consider the power of our own speech. Grace allows us to start fresh with each new day. Self-examination and self-discipline are part of the Christian life. It is not selfish to begin each day asking God to give you the courage and wisdom to be a faithful disciple, to invite God to be part of every conversation you have, to remind you that each person to whom you speak and about whom you speak is a child of God, made in the image of God. It is not selfish to spend time at the end of the day reflecting prayerfully and critically on your behavior, to own those times when you got sucked into someone else’s stuff, their anger, their fear, or their uncertainty. It is not selfish to pray each day for God to give you the wisdom to change the things you are able to change and the courage to leave the rest up to God. James reminds us that the tongue is a powerful little thing. Yet, it is not the tongue that gets us into trouble. The tongue is just another muscle without the head and heart to direct it. May we think before we speak but never allow fear to keep us from speaking the truth the world needs to hear. May it be so.

Amen