

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 116:1-9

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

09/15/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

27 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?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 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." 34 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. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in

return for their life? 38Those 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The Tongue

Good morning! Like many families, I grew up with a tradition on Christmas Day. Throughout the many meals, gift exchanges, and time together, the television would always be on in the background. The channel was set to TNT and the 1983 film *A Christmas Story* would be on ALL day. One of my favorite scenes occurs after they have picked up their tree. After trying to help his father change a tire he knocks over the lug nuts and they go flying across the snow. “Fudge,” he yells. The narrator picks up from there: “*Only I didn’t say ‘fudge.’ I said THE word, the big one, the queen-mother of dirty words.*” He spends the evening with a bar of soap in his mouth while his mother makes him reflect on his decisions.

Words have power. Several scientific studies have shown that when inflicting a person with pain, the person was able to handle more if they were given the opportunity to swear. A different part of our brain even lights up when we swear. It seems that different words can be ascribed greater meaning.

The writer of James knew this, and in our second lesson today they are warning the community of the dangers that our words can inflict. We started two weeks ago on September 1 with the book of James as the writer encouraged us to be believers that are active in what we do, not just passive

hearers. “*19You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness... 22But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,*”¹ they write. Last week we heard a section from the second chapter of James where they write about the importance of actually doing something with our faith. We must actively avoid favoritism and live out our faith with actions. James writes “*14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*”²

It’s all about passive and active belief for the writer of James. Active belief is about what we do, and what we say. And it’s the words that we use that we turn to today. The author finds it strange that unlike a stream or tree, out of our mouth we produce both good and bad. A stream cannot produce fresh and brackish water, and an olive tree doesn’t produce figs, but we human beings seem uniquely gifted at saying both good and bad things.

Take the Gospel lesson from today for example! In the Gospel of Mark we read about Jesus asking the disciples who they thought he was, and we get this beautiful confession from Peter, “*You are the Messiah.*” Then, only 3 verses later Peter is rebuking Jesus! It’s actually a very Lutheran point, we often talk about how we are both saints and sinners. Saints in that we are

¹ James 1:19-20, 22 NRSV

² James 2:14-17 NRSV

baptized believers called to do God’s work, sinners in that we seem to get it wrong a lot of the time.

James wants to remind us that what we say has the powerful potential to cause a lot of damage. *“3If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4Or 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. 5So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!”*³

It seems that words have been causing pain for thousands of years. It was true in the first century, and it’s true now. Listen to what one scholar wrote about this very text around the year 1994: *“although this section of James often strikes people today as strange, we are in the middle of one of the most intensive social debates about speech in modern times.”*⁴ The more things change, the more they stay the same, right?

If we want to call ourselves Christians, our words can’t tear others down. As we head into the always contentious election time we will hear a lot of hurtful things. James reminds us that WE are called to be better, that our words cannot be filled with hate and fire.

Likewise, we must work to bring words of hope and love. It’s not enough to just avoid hateful speech, we must build one another up! A word of hope or encouragement may swing the tide for someone fighting a battle we don’t even realize. When I was little, it was words of affirmation that made me feel loved and welcomed in the church at a time when it felt like I wasn’t good at anything.

³ James 3:3-5 NRSV

⁴ Perkins, Pheme. *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 115.

So, as you go about your lives, remember to encourage one another, bring hope and love to the conversations you enter. Seek out a loved one or friend and tell them why they're special to you. Because, as James would say, you are all beloved. Amen.