

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 12, 2021

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

James talks about the tongue, but what he is really talking about is words. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me is a great nursery rhyme and a good thought, but not quite true. Words have power, don't they?

Words have the power to define, to tear down, to box in, to cause fear. The author of James knows this for a fact. How this little tongue and not holding it can be the start of a small fire that grows into a huge blaze.

And yet, that same tongue, can extinguish that blaze, can build up, can give hope, can restore faith.

Words have power.

Jesus asks his followers what the word on the street is about him. Who do the pundits say that I am? Some of them are saying he's like John the Baptist (it's an apt description as the content of their preaching was very similar). Others are saying he is Elijah, the prophet thought to return to prepare the way for the promised savior of the Jews, the Messiah. Others aren't even shooting that high and just classify him as one of the prophets. A standout in that moment, but not necessarily anyone of great note.

Then Jesus asks the really important question, "Who do you say that I am?"

With all the speculation floating around out there. What do you have to say about who I am? It is a question the faithful have answered for millennia now. But only in the last 150 years or so has there been a concerted effort to find the

“real” Jesus. The historical figure behind the faith. That quest really began with Albert Schweitzer’s book “The Quest of the Historical Jesus”. There followed many others, all trying to use the latest biblical and historical tools of the day to get to the real human that was Jesus.

But what you find when you read their books, especially in contrast to each other, is that the Jesus described tends to look a lot like the author. Who Jesus was tends to fit a model that they already had formed. In this way, they were like the crowd, fitting Jesus into the mold of things they knew- John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet.

Peter’s answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am” is a bold one- you are the Messiah!

Words have power.

That word in particular, Messiah, had weight among the Jewish community. The Messiah was the promised one of God, a descendant of the greatest King who ever lived (David), a great warrior who would rise up and violently throw the hated Roman occupiers out of the Holy Land, a devout priest who would return the people to the worship of the One True God, and make of them- as a nation- a city on a hill, a beacon to draw the rest of the world in.

Peter’s word and Jesus’ acceptance of it would have dramatically shifted the way the disciples viewed Jesus. In my mind it is like the way Denzel Washington’s reacts to Tom Hank’s in the movie *Philadelphia* when he tells him he has AIDS. Suddenly, everything is different.

Jesus knows the power of that word. Knows that the Messiah the disciples are waiting for is a triumphant one- victorious warrior, strong and charismatic ruler, pious and holy priest leading them to their great promised destiny.

Jesus also knows that this is not who he is called to be. At least, not in the way that they think. So, he begins to work on debunking the myth that had grown up around Messiah. He uses language to begin to chip away at it. He talks about the Son of Man, not Messiah. His words paint a totally different picture from what they expected. Suffering, rejection, being killed, resurrection. Not easy words, by any stretch of the imagination.

Then he goes even further, extending those words to those who desire to follow him. Denying ourselves, taking up our own cross and following Jesus to Golgotha. Losing our life, so that we might save it. Not easy words.

Words, have power.

When Martin Luther heard the question from Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” his earliest answer was a terrifying judge. A figure whose tongue was so dangerous it was depicted in paintings as a sword. Jesus was the one whose word threw sinners into the fiery pit to suffer for their sins. And Martin just knew he was one of those people. And he feared God, almost resented God. Knowing he could never measure up to the standard God had created for salvation and wondering at God’s cruelty.

Words have power.

Despite this, Luther continued to read scripture, to struggle with this very God who he feared, and in those words of scripture, particularly those written by the

Apostle Paul, his eyes were opened. He had a glimpse of the reality of who Jesus is, who God is. I wonder if that moment was very like Peter's- a flash of insight and clarity that changed him, even if he didn't fully understand what it meant. Suddenly, Luther understood that Jesus was not a terrifying judge, but a wounded savior. The throne Jesus sat on was not the judgment seat of Medieval imagination but the cross. Luther understood that God's mercy was so wide it enveloped him, even in his sinfulness, and that the love of Jesus covered over the sins that marked him. He saw Jesus as the innocent one who died for the things that Luther should have died for. And in that free exchange, gave Luther life.

Words have power!

So, how would you answer the question from Jesus? Who do you say that I am? Is Jesus a really wise man with some good thoughts about how to live life? A self-help guru that can help you get wealth just by asking for it? Is he still in your mind some two-dimensional painting you saw in your youth? Is he a social justice warrior? A "muscular" Jesus?

We should have a care in our answer, because like the Galileans of Jesus' day, like the disciples, like all those learned scholars chasing after the "historical" Jesus, I wonder if too often the one we find is the one we want to find. One way to find if that might be so, is if you ever find yourself reading scripture and pulling Jesus aside- like Peter- and saying, No, No, No... you have this all wrong! God is about power and might, triumph over all those things that I don't like! Vindication for my own point of view. Putting those other misbegotten souls in their place.

If you have ever done this, you just might want to re-think your understanding of who Jesus is.

The happy thing is Jesus doesn't keep it a mystery. In fact, over the next few weeks we will hear Jesus time and again- with great patience- tell his disciples that they still don't quite understand and explain to them again who he is. What being Messiah really means and what it will mean to truly follow him.

As one author put it, Jesus says, "The Son of Man is ordained by God to suffer, die, and be raised. And so are his followers. Are you coming?"

Who Jesus is, is the one who had everything- the God head- come down to this earth- filled with disease, war, anger, hatred, betrayal, death- not to Lord it over us... but to walk the humblest road, talk to everyone from the poor homeless alcoholic under the bridge, to the owner of Odies, to the mayor of Cedar Rapids. To tell them about the life that is fuller and more abundant. A life lived not for ourselves, for our freedom, our wants and desires. Rather, to live a life of self-denial (there's a loaded and powerful word), one that is oriented to the good of others. To their happiness, freedom, and wants. And he has the audacity to say, this is the life that if filled with abundance, with true happiness, with peace.

Jesus is the embodiment of God's love for us, come to try and point us, those beloved created in God's image, towards the better way. Come to speak truth- If you try and save your life, you will so lose it. It just can't be done by us humans. But if we "lose" it for the sake of Jesus and the message he brings. For the sake of the God who created the whole world with a Word (word's have power!) We will find it. And it can't be bought, it can only be received, a free gift from that same loving God.

I invite you to come back over the next few weeks as we walk with Jesus, to learn more about who he is, how that matches up with how you answered that

question, and to ponder if, perhaps, you might have some misunderstanding. The grace of Jesus is that he is patient, that he'll stick around as long as we're willing to grapple with him- like Martin Luther- and somewhere along the line we will have that same flash of insight that Peter and Luther both had... and life will never be the same.

So come along, and let's see if what Jesus says is indeed true. Let's listen carefully, talk with one another, talk to God in prayer, and think long and hard.

For now, I invite you to come to the table and receive some travel rations, bread and wine, the promised Body and Blood of Jesus- freely given and shed for you so that you might have life, fuller and more abundant.

Then let us go, and follow Jesus on the way.