

## **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38**

James talks about the tongue as a restless evil, full of deadly poison. Something that can set the world on fire- and not in a good way. James talks about the tongue, but what he is really talking about are 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. Anyone who has spoken a rumor or unkind word about another can confirm that. Just see what has happened to Springfield, Ohio and the family of Aiden Clark.

And yet, that same tongue can extinguish that blaze, can build up, can give hope, can restore faith. "I have a dream! Ask not what your country can do for you..."

Words have power.

And those who have a vocation of teaching- from parents to preachers, from coaches to newscasters, from social influencers to politicians should recognize that power. Be in awe of it and be careful in their use of words.

Words can convince someone that they are dumb or brilliant. That they are weak or strong. That they have worth or are worthless.

Words can convince people to do amazing things for their neighbors or to do awful things to those same neighbors.

Words have power.

It is why I approach this preaching and teaching task with fear and trembling. Because if I proclaim to you, teach you, a way that is not that of Jesus and you follow it, that's on me. I am answerable to God for that.

Words have power.

Jesus asks his followers what the word on the street is about him. What do the social media influencers say. The response is that some say he is like John the Baptist, others that he is Elijah- the prophet thought to return to prepare the way for the promised Messiah. Others are saying he's just one of the prophets of God.

Then Jesus asks the really important question, "What have you been contributing to the conversation about who I am?" That's not how I've always translated this passage, but I'm convinced that this is the better translation. Jesus isn't giving a pop quiz. Jesus is asking, what have you all been teaching about who I am?

Peter responds, "We've been teaching you are the Messiah."

That word in particular, Messiah, had power 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. That image all contained in one word. Messiah.

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. To lead the world!

Jesus also knows that this is not who he has come to be. So, he begins to work on deflating the power of that word 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 cutting 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. And it was so different from the picture he had grown up with both in the church and in popular piety.

Through those words, Luther has a flash of insight. His imagination transformed. 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. And in that free exchange, gave Luther life. Luther saw that God in Jesus is merciful, filled with grace and love for all.

Words have power!

There is a temptation to follow the path of Peter. To offer up a worldly Jesus who wields earthly power. Who leads us into political, military, and religious dominance over others. Who gathers the righteous and throws everyone else into the fires of hell. This is a vision of God, Jesus, and the church that a segment of our Christian tradition in the US follows. It's called Christian Nationalism.

But how does Jesus react to that? This idea of being Messiah! Get behind me Satan, he says. The tempter is the one who places that image before

us. Because it leads not to God, but to ourselves. Which was the problem from the Garden in the first place.

Words have power.

Because words stir our imagination. And imagination is necessary for reality to change.

We will speak words over and around Eva this morning as she is brought by her parents Amanda and Brian to receive the bath that will change the rest of her existence.

Words like new life, words like grace and love, words like child of God.

Words that usher her into life age long. Words that have the power to shape her life, that have shaped our lives. Words that create her as the beloved child of God whom God will never desert. A reality spoken into being by God's Word.

Isaiah 50:4 has the prophet acknowledging, "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." But what the prophet and I both know is that only works when that Word is God's, not ours. When that Word points people in the direction Jesus goes. Not when it points them where I want them to go.

Words have power, my friends. Especially when they are the Word that is Jesus.

Power to do what they say. This is my Body, this is my Blood. Eat and Drink so that you may go forth sustained for your journey. Power to

transform- You are a beloved child of God, deserving of love and respect. You are gifted by God with unique talents and abilities. Talents and abilities that can make your life and the life of those around you fuller and more abundant.

Words have power- especially when they are God's Word. The blessings I say over you are not just letters that float by you. But a reality that clings to you. One that calls into being the very thing I speak. God does bless you and keep you in God's hands. God's face does shine on you in all times and place and God is ever so gracious to you. God does look upon you and smile and God's presence does bring peace- that Shalom that is not just absence of conflict but the wholeness- pulled togetherness that resists the stirring up of the storms that will blow over us.

Words have power. Both when we bless and when we damn. So, we best be careful how we use them.

I was reminded this week by The Rev. Dr. Sam Giere in his presentation about his book *Freedom and Imagination: Trusting Christ in an Age of Bad Faith*, about the power of words to fire the imagination. To paint for us a picture of the reign of God that has come near in Jesus. To place us within that picture. And that when we can imagine that. When our minds grasp that, then transformation comes. Because when we image that God really does love us with such wild abandon. We can then imagine that God really can love that SOB over there with that same abandon too.

And then we can see- really see the reality of the reign of God that has come near in Jesus. The one we have striven these last three plus months to describe.

Jesus came to us not to conquer us, but to love us from death back into life. To open our eyes to see that true life is about being loved and loving others, being healed and healing others, being served and serving others. Those are the words that have power in our lives. Because we have experienced them in the Word God spoke to us in Jesus Christ. God's love made visible.