

Sermon 16 September 2018
Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

In this morning's gospel Peter is learning what every one who follows Jesus must learn. It is the first and probably the last lesson of true discipleship. When we take the first step to follow him, we are unaware of how complete the commitment we are making, and how complete the change that is coming.

Jesus and the twelve are on the road, going from village to village in the region of Caesarea Philippi. On the way, Jesus asks two questions. First, *Who do the people say that I am?* The disciples almost fall over each other to answer him. After all, he is the topic of conversation wherever they go. *Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets.* Clearly, Jesus is having an impact. The people reach for the most superlative possibilities about who he might be. He is the one who has come to fulfill their greatest hopes—John the Baptist returned from the dead, Elijah sent back by God to shake up things and break Israel's bonds of Roman captivity. At very least he is what they have not seen in their lifetime, a true prophet, one who speaks God's unvarnished truth empowered by God's Spirit.

It is easy for the disciples to share the people's speculation. There is no risk involved, no personal cost for reporting what the people are saying.

Jesus ups the stakes and changes the atmosphere. *And what about you? Who do you say that I am?* I imagine the disciples are suddenly silent. The gabble of a moment before evaporates and they can hear the sound of their sandals shuffling through the dust. Finally Peter says it. *You are the Christ.*

Make no mistake—Peter may be saying the truth, the inspired truth about who Jesus is, but his words are a statement of faith in Christ. The disciple is staking his life on Jesus. In ways he does not understand, everything begins to change for Peter when he speaks his faith out loud on the road between villages in Caesarea Philippi. The change starts immediately.

With his identity revealed, Jesus begins to teach the disciples in earnest. They have taken the first step in a journey of transformative learning—their minds and their hearts will be changed. Jesus begins with the hardest lesson of all. He tells his followers that he *must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead*. No beating around the bush—Jesus comes right out with a concise summary of the story that has shaped much of history for almost 2,000 years.

It is not the contract Peter and the others thought they were signing. They were ready to follow the game-changer who would lead the revolt that would set the nation free from its foreign oppressor and restore and expand the former glory of Israel. The talk of suffering, rejection and death made no sense to them. It was repugnant, and Peter did not hesitate to confront and correct Jesus.

The short, simple, contentious conversation between the two men has been going on ever since. It is the pattern of change every one of us experiences as we try to follow Jesus in his Way of life. Over and over again, Jesus confronts, challenges, and changes our preconceptions—he changes our habits of mind and our habits of heart.

Before we begin the journey of transformative faith in Jesus' company, we live in accord with the world's ways. Our values are the world's values, we justify our actions according to the world's standards—we are *in* and *of* the world and we live by the values and standards of the world. Jesus teaches his followers to live from a new center. Our concerns will no longer hold center stage; the will of God will be the energizing reference for everything we try to do. Old patterns of self-justification and self-preservation will be replaced by patterns of patience, respect, and love for others. The world shifts on its axis—the center changes . . . from us to God and to God's love for the world.

Influenced by the Spirit, we are no longer easily offended. The fruits and gifts of the Spirit increasingly guide our lives and show in the choices we make and the ways we live. We live in a bigger, ever-

expanding world of grace. The changes show themselves in countless ways. One of the ways will be in greater self-control.

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The reading from James hones in on one the greatest changes coming for God's people. The better we follow Jesus, the more carefully we listen for and receive the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and the more control we have over our tongues.

James' passage follows on his earlier admonition—be slow to speak, quick to listen, and slow to anger. Now he focuses on the main culprit for many if not most of our problems—the tongue. Jesus tells his disciples that what goes *into* our bodies doesn't contaminate us; it is what comes out of the heart that soils us—and the primary conduit for the flow of evil from our hearts into the world is the tongue.

James is wonderfully graphic in describing the devastation we cause by what we say.

Think about this: a small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives.

Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire.

The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.

[The tongue] is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

This is one of the truths of our faith that we persistently and craftily neglect. While we may recognize gossip and slander when we hear other people speak such words, we almost unconsciously accept our own words of judgmental as normal conversation. We're just passing on information. We have favorite stories about when someone *done us wrong*, or when we've seen someone not at their best. Idle gossip is standard fare at many of our gatherings, and we think little to nothing of passing on hurtful news, especially when we can sprinkle it with our own opinions.

How many times have I spoken in anger and regretted the results? How many times have my words of judgment come back on me for their unfairness or misunderstanding? Sometimes we try to build up

ourselves by tearing down another. We use our gift of language in such paltry ways. *With it we both bless God and curse human beings made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!*

James tries hard to get our attention—so many metaphors in so few verses: bridles for horses, ships steered by small rudders, ravenous, devouring flames, tamed animals, fresh water and salt water, fig trees, olive trees and grapevines. He uses anything to try to break through to us about the seriousness of the things we say. It is his measure of maturity. *We all make mistakes often, but those who don't make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity.*

That should encourage us to take special care about what we say—to work (with the help of God) to control our tongues. What would our world look like if we were quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry? What would the world be like if we were careful about what we said—speaking blessings instead of curses?

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I heard a story many years ago. A man saw his pastor going into a bar one afternoon. Without hesitation he spread the news that the so-called spiritual leader had a drinking problem and was associating with lowlifes in town. Weeks passed and it was discovered that the preacher was visiting the drinking establishment to reach out to and be with the bartender whose child had died.

The church member who had spread the flame of slanderous gossip mustered his courage and came to apologize to the pastor. He said he would make it right, would explain his mistake, tell the truth, and confess his sin to everyone he'd told. The pastor assured the man of his forgiveness, tried to put him at ease, but felt like he needed to make a point.

The pastor took a piece of typing paper and, while they were talking, he tore the paper into smaller and smaller pieces. The two men walked out into the churchyard and the pastor lifted and opened his hand into the wind. Tiny bits of paper swirled in every direction. The pastor said, *"It would be easier for you to retrieve every piece of paper*

and repair the entire sheet of paper than to track down the paths your words have traveled and repair the damage they have done.”

We simply cannot fix all the damage we do with our words—words spoken in anger or with cruel intent; petty gossip, or even soft judgment of the actions and hidden intent of someone we know. Our idle words diminish others, and truth-be-told, diminish us in the telling. Some people would not know what to talk about if they weren’t judging others for something.

We can learn to speak words of blessing, encouragement, hope, and love. Our tongues can be fountains of blessing instead of flames of division and hurt. If we learn to control what we say, we really do realize a new maturity—and we experience the intense, tangible blessing of being one of the peace-making children of God.

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Through the years Peter learned the wisdom of Christ. Eventually he stopped trying to straighten out Jesus—he stopped trying to get Jesus to do things the way he, Peter, preferred. Peter stopped trying to make God over into his own image—and yielded his spirit to God’s loving work in the heart—and through the tongue.

This week, more than any week before, let us ask God to help us carefully choose the words we speak, perhaps learn the beauty of silence, *and* become, more than ever before, the Lord’s peacemakers in a disturbed world.