

The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 16, 2018  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Proverbs 1:20-33  
Wisdom 7:26—8:1  
James 3:1-12  
Mark 8:27-38

*But no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*

That's what we heard earlier this morning in our second reading. It's a pretty bleak assessment.

I hope James doesn't really believe the situation is all that irredeemably, irrevocably dire and bleak. But it's understandable if he is. Consider our own world of cable television: one ostensibly offering "news," while blasting the other side for "fake news"; and another kind of news outlet blasting the first for "alt-news." Our politics don't seek to build anyone up; the rhetoric exercised for no purpose other than tearing one another down.

So, too, it'd be understandable if James is pessimistic. He's writing to a community in conflict. People are fighting, they're arguing. And it's clear that the fighting is intense, that people are using words that pierce and hurt, engaging in the kind of speech that destroys and that the words, once spoken, cannot be taken back. The damage has been done.

The force of the argument seems as bleak as the language is poetic: a forest set ablaze by a small fire; the tongue ... full of deadly poison; a fouled spring that offers brackish water; salt water cannot yield water that is fresh.

But I actually think James believes there is hope. For he speaks, too, of how a horse can be checked by a bit in the mouth and how a ship is guided by a small rudder. I think his point must surely be for us to remember how deeply our words can cut, in the hope that we will be gentler in our speech, that we will choose our words more carefully than is our wont.

That's still a timely exhortation in a modern world. Words matter. Words can do great damage. And words can still build up and heal. Choose your words carefully; use them well.

Jesus knew that words matter. So he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

I wonder who edited the list of names we heard offered in reply here this morning. Was it something Mark did as he was figuring out how to tell the story of this inquiry? Or did the disciples opt to pass over some of the more hurtful things people said about Jesus?

After all, we know that people has some pretty awful things to say about Jesus. Some of the scribes called Jesus a blasphemer. Some folks said he was possessed by Beelzebul. (Now there's a harsh word!) When Jesus went to his hometown synagogue, the people there called him the "carpenter" (as if to challenge the notion he was somebody special).

But the disciples pass over the uglier words and names. Regardless, they offer only a flattering list: Elijah, John the Baptist, one of the prophets.

And on the evidence of what people had seen of Jesus so far, their answers actually make sense. Jesus' ministry of preaching and teaching and healing had been reminiscent of the great prophets of old. So it's not bad – who people say Jesus is – but it's not quite right either.

And that, of course, is when Jesus asks his follow-up question of those who knew him best: "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter speaks first (which is so typical of Peter): "You are the Messiah."

It's the right answer, of course. And it must have been an inspired response, because it goes beyond the evidence of what anyone had seen to this point. Jesus had done nothing to live up to the expectations of the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed king sent by God to free God's people from oppression, the powerful leader who would restore Israel's independence and glory.

"You are the Messiah." However Peter came up with that answer, he gets it right. So it seems. But even as he gets the answer right, he still manages to get it all wrong. That's clearly the point of what follows. Peter has the correct word to use for saying who Jesus is, but he hasn't a clue what to do with it. And so, in short order, Jesus rebukes Peter in the harshest of terms.

There's so much more I could – and should – say about what Jesus has to say to Peter and the others. But I'm not going to say more this morning. Maybe I'll come back and pick up from there next week. Suffice it to say for now that even as Peter provides the "correct" answer, he still manages to get everything wrong.

And it's not the only time Peter gets it wrong either. He gets it wrong all the way through, at least as Mark tells it. And he's not alone. Jesus' disciples consistently get it all wrong.

And that ought to be a cautionary point for you and me, as well. Words matter. Names matter. But we can say the right words about Jesus and still get just about everything wrong.

A woman named Sarah Dylan Breuer put it this way:

I can say that Jesus is "God from God, light from light, true God from true God," and if what I mean – and what my life testifies I mean – when I say "God" is "that very powerful being in the sky who's itching to punish everyone I dislike or find threatening," my supposedly orthodox confession of Jesus becomes empty at best and oppressive at worst. I can say that Jesus is "my Lord and Savior," and if my life testifies that Jesus saves me from responsibility to care for my neighbors [at home or abroad] and that Jesus' lordship is a kind of lording it over those perceived as weak or dirty, my confession is a distraction at best ... <sup>i</sup>

And that's got me wondering why Jesus asked the questions he asked that day.

We hear this story as an occasion when Jesus was testing the disciples – a test for right or wrong answers. And maybe that's what it is.

But then again, if even the correct answer turns out to be wrong in the end, maybe it was never a test at all. Maybe Jesus was simply trying to help them wrestle with the question: "Who am I to you?"

And that's something to keep in mind when Jesus still asks us, "Who do you say that I am?"

Maybe it's not a test, for which there is only one correct answer. Maybe we shouldn't worry very much about getting it right or be afraid of getting it wrong. Maybe it would be more helpful for us to hear Jesus' question as an invitation to seek the word or words or names that fit our relationships with all that is sacred, including Jesus and one another and ourselves.

I'll remind you that the New Testament itself doesn't provide a single definition. It's full of all sorts of images and names and metaphors.

The Gospel of John begins with a description of Jesus as "light" and "life." In that same gospel account, Jesus says, "I am living water" and "I am the bread of life" and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and "I am resurrection and life."

When, on that first Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene looks up at the one she first mistook for a gardener and sees Jesus instead, she calls him, "Rabbouni!" and nobody says she got it wrong!

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is referred to as rabbi and master and lord. Jesus himself speaks often in terms of family and friends.

Or we might take a hint from our first reading in the Old Testament and name Jesus "Lady Wisdom." It's a bit of a mix-gendered, but mystics have always been somewhat fluid. Julian of Norwich, among them, was comfortable calling Jesus "our true Mother."

So who is Jesus for you?

Your answer need not match that of your neighbor. Our answers will vary from person to person, depending on our experiences and our needs. That's not a flaw in our design. Rather, it reveals something beautiful about the church and the tapestry of faith we weave together.

For that matter, our answers need not be consistent; they might vary for any of us, perhaps from day to day. I think of a piece Nancy Rockwell wrote a few years back, in which she said this:

I offer from my own soul's journey, these names for Jesus: Rabbi, or Teacher, the name Magdalene called him by on Easter; Lover of My Soul, for all the times I have been comforted in my sorrows by a word of his; Friend, who bears me up and bears with me; Brother, whose spirit is as familiar to me as my own brother's, perhaps more so; Hope, for in his tales both clarity and hope have been revealed; Laser of Justice, for his Way intervenes in my spirit whenever an argument for a different justice appears in my world; Anointed, for his blessing has over and over touched and lifted me; Good Shepherd, the name I have experienced time and again: that I, when lost, am found; Bread and Wine, for when words fail, he still sustains.<sup>ii</sup>

None of this suggests that the question Jesus asks is unimportant, nor that the answers we offer don't matter. Our words do matter.

But I'm not sure we need to worry too much about coming up with the correct answer or be afraid we might get it wrong. Better, I think, to find the one that fits and see where it takes us.

Choose your words carefully, that our language will bless God our Creator and the ones created in God's own image, including you and me. And use them wisely – that the words we use (and the things we do work together to) build one another up and bespeak the truth of God's love for each of us and for all of us.

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<sup>i</sup> Sarah Dylan Breuer @ [http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2006/09/proper\\_19\\_year\\_.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2006/09/proper_19_year_.html).

<sup>ii</sup> Nancy Rockwell @ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/names-2/>.