

Lec 24B, September 15, 2024

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 116:1-8, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

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As Christians we are people of the book and even more, people of the Word—the word of God revealed in scripture, the Word of God revealed in Christ, the Word of God that we receive in bread and wine. Every week, we gather to hear that word, to be comforted and challenged and changed by it.

Words have power in our lives. Sometimes, words are actions on themselves, performative speech—words that not only describe but change our reality. That moment in a wedding ceremony where the bride and groom respond in turn, “I do.” Here today, in the words “I baptize you....”

Words affirm our relationships and declare our promises. Today we have been blessed to hear again the promises of God, and to respond in faith and hope with our own promises—the promises of parents and sponsors, the promises of this congregation to Sebastian and to our new members.

Words can comfort and sustain and heal. And words can be weapons, too, with the power to hurt and even kill.

In our readings today, we get urgent counsel about knowing when to speak and when to keep silent—how to use our own words in the light of God’s word and truth. James warns about the danger of careless words. And Jesus repeatedly tells people NOT to say what they have seen.

James spins words vividly himself, in three unexpected images of the tongue—how to control it, and how it controls us. First he talks about a bridle in a horse’s mouth—a little bit of metal set against the tongue. With the touch of an experienced rider, a bridle can keep a big strong animal under control. Then he compares the tongue to a rudder of a ship—again, a very small piece of wood or metal, but one that can control the direction of a huge ship. And then, he says, “the tongue is a fire”—with the power to ignite a whole forest, and which “is itself set on fire by hell.” He sums it all up by observing, “no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

It's enough to make you want to take a vow of silence.

James' words about the poisonous tongue might seem extreme, and yet, I imagine everyone here can think of an example that proves his point. Our words can do a lot of damage. In school, there's the kid who gets teased so relentlessly he starts throwing up every morning before getting on the bus. Or, a hurtful rumor at work or conspiracy theories on line that spread like wildfire—even though it turns out there's not a single spark of truth in them. Or maybe you can think of one or two examples from our political life.

Then there are our own hurtful words. Sometimes, even when we most want to help someone else and give comfort, we struggle for words and may say something that hurts more than it helps. Sometimes we give advice when we should just shut up and listen. And probably most everyone here has said something you bitterly regret—I know I have—words you would do anything to take back. As James writes, “all of us make many mistakes.”

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus repeatedly warns people about the dangers of words. Again and again, as excited crowds witness his deeds of healing, he urges them NOT to tell what they have seen.

But he knows people are talking—news of his miracles spreads like wildfire. So in today's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They've heard the buzz, and they answer, “John the Baptist, and others, Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” and then Peter answers with his simple and bold confession, “You are the Messiah.”

Yet Jesus' response is to silence them—“he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” Maybe he already understands that spreading the news is dangerous. This claim—that he is the Messiah—will get him killed, and he tells them for the first time that this is what will happen. Peter doesn't want to hear that.

Words are dangerous—and yet, so is silence. Words withheld can be weapons too—a boss who never offers any praise, a co-worker who rarely

says thank you, a parent or partner who punishes by retreating into icy silence. We come to regret words withheld or unspoken—a time when we saw someone being mistreated, or heard a racist comment, and said nothing. Or, we read a death notice—a teacher whose encouragement meant so much to us in high school—why didn't we ever go back to tell her that? Those who have buried anyone you loved and lost, what wouldn't you give, right now, to say, one more time, "I love you"? A friend or a family member, long estranged, and now gone, before either of you could say "I'm sorry," or "I forgive you."

And sometimes, words that are not spoken damage our relationships in ways that are more subtle but just as devastating. This happens a lot in church—we are annoyed or hurt about something someone does or says but we don't say anything. Sometimes, it really isn't anything that important. But often, it does matter, at least a little, and when we don't say anything, that little wound festers. Sometimes, people even end up leaving church because they are so mad at someone else—who might not even realize it. Or, they don't leave, and words that are withheld gradually fill a church with deadly silences—silences that separate people and keep us from growing in our relationships.

Words have the power to hurt, and also the power to heal. In Isaiah, the prophet celebrates his own gift of language—he has the "tongue of a teacher," able to "sustain the weary with a word." What a gift that is, when you are sustained by a compassionate word at just the right moment, or encouragement when you were about to give up, or a fresh idea that suggested a new way when you felt like you'd hit a dead end. Words that come like grace itself, as pure gift, to refresh us in our weariness and renew our hope.

By grace, we too can find the words that heal and build our relationships and our community. So take a moment to consider. Is there a difficult conversation you are avoiding? Can you take the risk of asking for what you need? Who do you need to invite? To console? To forgive?

Let us pray. In our life together, may our words--and our silences--give praise to you, our God. You have the words of eternal life. Amen.