

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2018
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It's Only Words

When I first became a priest, my cousins asked me what it was that attracted me to the ministry. I told them I had a sense that God had called me to dedicate my life to His service. Then they asked if I liked what I was doing and if it was a good fit for me. I told them, "I get paid to talk." They laughed and said, well, that explains it.

Today's texts are woven together with a thread about how we speak. The words we use are important. Perhaps just as important as the actions we take. The scriptures made me aware that in describing the world we see—we often mistake our perspective for the whole world view. Once we categorize something or someone, and file them away into a box, we tend to move onto the next thing in front of us. Describing the world or the people in it only from our perspective, and at a fixed point in time, limits our understanding of the real—a world full of people that are constantly changing.

I want to ask you some questions. What words do you use to describe yourself? Take a moment and think of 2-3 words that describe you as a person—do not include what you do or did for a living. Now ask yourself, who others say that you are? I think we answer this question using words we have heard people say to us, and words that describe who we hope we are, as it is difficult to know fully what others think of us when we only have their words to go on. How does the world describe Holy Cross, this Body of Christ? Who do you say Jesus is? We spent some time last year in Formation Hour exploring who Jesus is and we explored Him as storyteller, teacher, social advocate, brother, and Messiah. How do you describe Jesus, kind, forgiving, caring, thoughtful, and generous? Do those words describe you as well?

I am going to look at the Gospel starting from the bottom up. The last paragraph is filled with words that speak of losing our lives, gaining the world, but forfeiting our lives. And, if you want to save your life you will lose it, so deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me—hi ho, hi ho, it's off to heaven we go! It sounds confusing, what does that mean?!? I think it means that if we do not know the will of God, we cannot follow the will of God. To lose our lives can mean to literally die in the name of God, but it can also mean that we die to our own wants and desires, and follow the will of God—putting behind us things of earth, and focusing our efforts on things of heaven. I put the last paragraph first, because the bottom line for us as Christians is to know who Jesus is, to know who we are, and then become willing to follow the will of God—even if it feels like we are risking comfort and taking a path that sometimes defies human logic.

Well, how do we know the will of God? Proverbs talks to us about Wisdom crying out to us in the street and asking, "*How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?*" Wisdom, is seen as a person engaging with us directly, and she does not mince words. "*Because I have called you and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity: I will mock when panic strikes.*" Wisdom seems like that friend many of us have, who warns us that it is wet and muddy outside—then, when we ignore them and slip face first into the mud, they burst into laughter—before picking us up, washing us off, and then trying once again to teach us not run through mud in the rain. The lessons today are about how we speak and the words we say, it's important. Wisdom is trying to speak to us all the time, but I think we get so wrapped up in the here and now, we are deaf to her. We need to express everything all the time, and speaking has overrun the art of listening, and it is hard to listen when you are speaking. When we do learn some spiritual wisdom, it changes our answer to the question, "Who do we say Jesus is?" and it changes how we see ourselves.

James examines the singular importance of teachers in our lives, and particularly the impact of a teacher's words on the lives of those who hear her. I am not sure who your teachers were, but can you imagine a teacher that never once misspoke, never once chose an unfortunate word or phrase? None of us is perfect and we cannot escape our humanity. James gives us two illustrations, a horse's bit and a ship's rudder. Rudders are small, in relation to the size of a whole ship, and bits will fit in a horse's mouth. Yet, each of these small parts determines the path that the larger body takes. James also speaks about the tongue, as that, which controls one's whole being—our tongues!

Think about what you post on social media. Do we consider the impact posts have on how we are perceived, or how we might be controlled by social media? Consider how our words, spoken or digital, affect our lives, both in the wider society and within our community of faith. Are we gossips? Do we say words that we think may be "helpful" and our words end up causing discord? The pen is mightier than the sword, but it is a two-edged sword.

James also compares the tongue to a flame that lights a forest on fire. To put it bluntly, the words we say can open the doors of our hearts, and our parish and let in all sorts of evil and injustice. To say that the tongue can set fire registers serious concerns about how casual we are with our words, and that we do not give enough consideration to the impact they have on others. Consider how we speak to each other in church, do we bless God with the same tongues we use to curse each other?

Near my desk at home hangs a saying, "*Be careful with your thoughts, for your thoughts become your words. Be careful with your words, for they direct your actions. Be careful of your actions, for they define your character. Be careful of your character, for it determines your destiny.*" What we say matters.

In the Gospel Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?" is at the same time, a question to us, "who will you say that you are?"—therein lies the difficulty. If we only had to answer who Jesus is, that would be one thing, but if we call ourselves Christians, when we answer the question of Jesus' identity we also reveal who we say we are—or at least who we are trying to be.

Perhaps this would sound clearer if we switch it around. Who you are reveals who you have decided Jesus to be. Jesus' question is not a test. It's about coming face-to-face with your own commitment, your own discipleship, your own identity. It's the moment when you have to admit that how you follow Jesus, actually connects you with a sort of confession of who you believe Jesus to be.

In the end Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" invites us into a conversation about our Christian identity. We need to understand the connection between who we are, and how we will strive to be like Jesus. In our world of instant gratification, it is more and more the norm to blurt out a response as soon as the question is finished being asked. Our responses can become canned, habitual, and anticipated. We love being the fastest, but it keeps us from thinking. More and more we listen to respond instead of listening to learn, reflect, and then thoughtfully reply.

Richard Rohr said, "*Christianity is a lifestyle – a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, and loving. However we made it into a religion and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's 'personal Lord and Savior.'*"

Jewish theologian and philosopher Rabi Abraham Joshua Heschel, mirrored this sentiment, "*When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message becomes meaningless.*"

What we say matters, and our words become our actions, and the world describes us based on those actions. It is not enough to say we are Christians, and then treat the world any way we please. When we proclaim our faith, we have to live our faith and be true to our words. Because, faith is a verb! Amen.

Information from: *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, Westminster John Knox Press 2009

<https://www.workingpreacher.org>

Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38