

Sermon for Proper 19B
Sunday, September 16, 2018
“Proclaim the Messiah”

Text: James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I remember back in grade school something we used to say out on the playground: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” That was one of the ways we responded when somebody called us a name that we didn’t like or appreciate. In other words, we were saying to the other person, the name-caller, “I *know* who I am. Whatever you say to me, doesn’t matter, because you can’t hurt me with those words.” Two weeks ago, the message of the gospel was that what goes into our bodies is not what defiles, but what comes out. The things that come out of our mouths reflect the intentions of our hearts. We can say things that hurt or we can say things that heal; and hopefully, we use our words to declare the truth.

In the gospel lesson today, Jesus pushes his disciples to make some declarations about who people say he is. “Who do people say that I am?” But then he pushes them even further by asking, “Who do you say that I am?” That question digs even deeper because it compelled them to say something about who they were and the truths that were to come out of their mouths. Then Jesus told them not to tell anyone. I always chuckle when Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone. Jesus knew something about human nature. You know how we can be when somebody tells us not to tell something; we try so hard to keep it to ourselves, but we just gotta tell somebody about it. And we even try to tell them not to tell anyone, but we already know how that’s going to go, right?

Jesus asked his disciples to declare who they were by declaring who he is. Peter got it—at least in that one moment—when he declared, “You are the Messiah.” He was revealing something important about Jesus, but he was also revealing something about what he believed and what was in his mind and heart. Now this was challenging, because not everyone believed that to be true; not everyone believed that Jesus was, or even could be, the Messiah. Jesus was asking them to stand up for an idea that wasn’t popular, that challenged the status quo, saying things and doing things that were different from the way the rest of the world

does it. St. James, in his letter that we also read this morning, wrote that life as the Church, life as the people of God carries with it great responsibility, and what we say is part of that responsibility. Even when it seems to go counter to what we hear the everybody else saying, what we say can have far reaching effects.

These days, it seems like we are being bombarded by issues of freedom of speech. Now we take that freedom very seriously, but I think these days, people are going overboard with trying to exercise that freedom. Just because we have the right to say it, doesn't mean that we *should* say it. We must always be mindful of the effect of what our words will have once we've said them. Words, even when they're the truth, can either hurt or heal, words can either beat down or build up. I heard someone say, not too long ago, that when the truth is told with the intention of being hurtful or spiteful, then it's just as damaging as a lie. We must always be compelled to say that which will have the power to heal, build up, and reveal the love and power of God.

When we're like Peter and we declare that Jesus is the Messiah, we are doing more than just verifying Jesus's ID. We are proclaiming that his words, his actions, and his teaching shape who we are, what we do, what we say, and what we teach. Often that means standing up for what is unpopular or going against the norms of our own society and culture. Jesus was always standing up for the marginalized, the disenfranchised, those who were shunned, even those who were in desperate need of repentance. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." These words aren't just about living vs. dying, they could also refer to how we are looked at by the world, how we portray ourselves in the face of the voices that want to put others down, strip away another person's dignity, or point fingers. We may risk our popularity when we stand up and say that it is not ok to disrespect another person or group of people for the way they live, what they believe, or how they practice their faith, what country they come from, the color of their skin, or whatever other labels that society uses to discriminate. We may also risk our popularity when we tell Christian folk that what they are doing and what they are saying are not fulfilling Christ's commandment to us to love one another, especially when the words of the

Bible are used to justify discrimination, belittling, or upholding bad laws. But we have to be willing to take that risk for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of declaring to the world that Jesus *is* the Messiah and that there is a better way to live.

James cautions us in his epistle against using empty words. Just as much as negative words can have a destructive impact, empty words can be just as bad. Saying that we are Christians, but not supporting our claim by our actions is empty faith. Giving lip service to being a Christian and declaring Jesus as Messiah, but not helping the poor or defending the marginalized is empty faith. Calling ourselves a Christian nation, but not being sympathetic to the plight of persecuted refugees from the Middle East or to immigrants from Latin America or anywhere else who want to make a better life for themselves—that is empty faith. If we bless the Lord and Father in one breath and curse those made in the likeness of God in the next breath, that is empty faith. And if James's words aren't convincing enough, perhaps we ought to ask the question from that well-known bumper sticker, "What would Jesus do?" Well, just think about how he responded to the Pharisees when he respected even tax collectors and sinners. If we call ourselves Christians and claim to take the Word of God seriously, but we don't show love, respect, and compassion toward our fellow humans, then we are living with empty faith. Following the letter of the law is not what we're called to do; following the will of God is what we are called to do. In the words of the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Hosea 6:6) Jesus quoted that verse, too, by the way. Mercy, not sacrifice; mercy toward each other, not routine burnt offerings in the temple. Compassion for each other, not tearing each other down. Respect for one another, not beating someone down with Bible verses. Welcoming the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee, the ones of another faith, not ignoring them or marginalizing them. Caring for the poor, making certain all can earn a decent wage, insuring that all can receive decent health care and an education. Our words can have a profound impact on all of this. I'm not simply talking about us here, but also our local and national leaders, and our church leaders too. We all have a responsibility to use our tongues to steer us toward the benefit of others and the glory of God.

Take the responsibility that comes with Christian living and use your speech, not to put someone else down, but to further God's kingdom

on earth. Let your proclamation that Jesus *is* the Messiah mean something. So, hold your tongue until it can utter good. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Proper 19 (Year B, Volume 4)

Walter Bruggeman, “Free Speech: A license to destroy or a responsibility to build up,” <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/free-speech-a-license-to-destroy-or-a-responsibility-to-build-up-james-31-12/>

“James 3:1-12: Sticks, stones, and the power of words,”
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-eric-d-barreto/james-31-12-sticks-stones-and-the-power-of-words-_b_1875518.html