

The Power of Words

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, September 13, 2009)

James 3:1-10 (TEV) ¹My friends, not many of you should become teachers. As you know, we teachers will be judged with greater strictness than others. ²All of us often make mistakes. But if a person never makes a mistake in what he says, he is perfect and is also able to control his whole being. ³We put a bit into the mouth of a horse to make it obey us, and we are able to make it go where we want. ⁴Or think of a ship: big as it is and driven by such strong winds, it can be steered by a very small rudder, and it goes wherever the pilot wants it to go. ⁵So it is with the tongue: small as it is, it can boast about great things.

Just think how large a forest can be set on fire by a tiny flame! ⁶And the tongue is like a fire. It is a world of wrong, occupying its place in our bodies and spreading evil through our whole being. It sets on fire the entire course of our existence with the fire that comes to it from hell itself. ⁷We humans are able to tame and have tamed all other creatures—wild animals and birds, reptiles and fish. ⁸But no one has ever been able to tame the tongue. It is evil and uncontrollable, full of deadly poison. ⁹We use it to give thanks to our Lord and Father and also to curse other people, who are created in the likeness of God. ¹⁰Words of thanksgiving and cursing pour out from the same mouth. My friends, this should not happen!

Mark 8:27-38 (NRSV) ²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Bull’s Eye! Right on Target! Did you ever hit the mark, whether in archery, target practice, darts, or maybe just by giving the correct answer? Doesn’t it feel good? It is almost like the whole rest of the world continues to try to measure up to you and your good answer, because for that instant, you have arrived, you are at perfection. Sometimes you don’t even want to take another shot, because you know you can’t do two in a row. But for the moment, there you are, at the center, you hit the target.

Peter must have felt a little like that in the first part of our lesson for today. The lesson begins with Jesus asking the disciples, **who do people say that I am**, or in other words, what’s the word around town, what do you hear on the street? Well, some people say you are John the Baptist, come back to life. That would have been so wonderful. It would be like good overcoming evil, proving that even a bad king like Herod couldn’t destroy that which is truly righteous. Others are more optimistic yet and say you are the prophet Elijah, who we read did not die, but God came and carried him away. The people of Israel often prayed that Elijah would come back, and this would be a sign that God still cared for them, and that God was about to intervene in world events, that God would restore the glory to Israel. Other people thought Jesus was one of the prophets. This is still significant. Many people felt that God had not spoken to the people of Israel in years. They looked for a prophet who might again bring the word of God to a troubled time, to an oppressed, downtrodden people, and they hoped that Jesus might be the one.

And yet, every one of these answers, as good as they might seem, are just hearsay, gossip. Then Jesus brings out the really important question: “Who do **you** say that I am?” This is the important question we must always ask about everything in Scripture. Our response to God’s Word is more important than understanding the technical points of Scripture. Even if you know Greek and Hebrew, understand the culture and how people of

that day would have understood Jesus' words, that is not as important as your answer to the question, what does this mean for you, today?

Then Scripture tells us that Peter gave the right answer: **“You are the Messiah.”** One word, Messiah, and Peter has it right. He is on target; he has hit the bull's eye. As you read the Gospels, you will read that Peter makes enough mistakes, so that when he gives the right answer, you almost want to cheer for him. In fact, as Matthew tells us of this incident, in 16:16, Jesus praises Peter for his answer.

But Mark simply tells us that Jesus orders the disciples, sternly, not to tell anyone. How can this be especially in light of verse 38 where Jesus says, **“Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father?”** There are some who interpret this verse to mean that we must be bold in proclaiming Christ. If we do not witness to Christ, publicly professing the Lordship of Christ, then Christ will be ashamed of us in the time to come. And yet, Jesus told the disciples to tell no one, even though Peter had the right word. How can that be?

Some have argued that Jesus was just trying to tell the disciples that his time had not yet come. But I feel that verse 31 should be more closely connected, because there we may find a different answer. Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who it is understood will come and set the people of Israel free from bondage. In those days, the people of Israel were more concerned about bondage to Rome, than they were concerned about bondage to sin. They were more interested in living free from Roman oppression, than they were interested in living in eternity with God. And so the word, Messiah, was, in all likelihood, incorrectly understood by Peter. Jesus tried to re-educate Peter by talking to him about how the Messiah must undergo great suffering and even death. This was too hard to listen to, and so Peter rebuked Jesus. No, Jesus, it can't be this way. These words are too hard for us to bear, don't say such things. The words of Peter are not recorded, but his words to Jesus certainly got him into trouble again.

James deals more directly with the problem of how our words get us into trouble. It has been suggested that the tongue is the heaviest part of the human body, because none of us can hold it. But James also is giving us another image that can be either negative or positive. Our tongue, the words we say, can be like a rudder on a ship, steering us in the right direction; ...or maybe in the wrong direction. I suspect we can all think of stories of how the wrong words have brought down the most powerful. Representative Joe Wilson certainly spoke two wrong words this week that probably hurt himself more than they did anyone or any cause some good.

I am convinced that the opposite is also possible. If we can let our words be positive, encouraging, building up those around us, then those words can shift our attitudes to becoming more positive. And if our words and our attitudes are positive, then our actions will follow, just as surely as the ship follows the set of the rudder. Jesus can be our guide in this.

When Jesus accepted the title of Messiah, or Christ, he always explained it in terms of service, humility, and even suffering. There was no triumphalism in his attitude. What this means is that when we confess Jesus as Lord, when we say, Jesus is my Lord, there can be no judgment over others in these words. I can't tell you how many people have told me how they have been hurt by the self-righteous words of those who call themselves Christian, some of them even in this room today, words that do nothing to win souls for Christ but in fact have the opposite effect, driving people away from the church, from the fellowship of believers. Accepting Jesus as Lord does not mean you are better than others; you are just forgiven, which can only lead you to a deep humility and gratitude to God.

So let your words be guided by Christ, by Christ within you. Words that hurt, words that lead us astray, words that cause division and pain, are not words that Jesus would have you speak. Search the Gospels and you will find that Jesus very seldom speaks words of condemnation to sinners, but how often he condemns the religious people of the time for their self-righteous words. Let your words be loving, humble, imitating Jesus as best as you can, and by your loving words your whole being will be guided, as the rudder guides the ship.

May Christ dwell within you, and may your words reflect the love of God that dwells in your heart, and may those words have the power to guide your life in the way of righteousness. Amen.