

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 15, 2024 – 17 Pentecost
Mark 8:27-38; James 3:1-12
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As you know, by this point in Mark's Gospel Jesus has been traveling with his disciples for some time, healing and teaching and feeding the people, challenging religious leaders, and giving special instruction to his twelve companions. This morning's passage records a turning point in Jesus' journey. Mark tells us that Jesus is "on the way," and that has a specific meaning. From this point on, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and the cross.

He asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The people understand Jesus to be a prophet. Then Jesus says, to those who know him best, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him correctly, "You are the Messiah," the Christ, the anointed one of God. Jesus goes on to explain what that means. He will suffer, be rejected by those in authority, and killed, and after three days rise again. He will not win victories, defeat Israel's enemies, and restore Israel's greatness, as the Jewish people of the time expected a Messiah to do.

Peter rebukes Jesus because he could not imagine a Messiah who suffers and dies. Jesus' reply is quick and strong, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." As we read the Gospel, we may be like Peter from time to time. We don't want to hear what Jesus actually says. We want to hear something more comfortable. Frankly, much of what Jesus says isn't comforting or comfortable. But we are better off wrestling with the truth of his words than effectively saying, "No, you can't really mean that," as Peter did.

After this confrontation between Jesus and Peter, Jesus called the crowd to listen to him and he said, "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."

The words of the Bible and the teaching of Jesus sometimes get "processed" over time and wind up in popular parlance in a somewhat distorted fashion. This idea of taking up our crosses to follow Jesus is one example. People speak this way, "we all have our crosses to bear." Yes, we do, in the sense that we all have troubles, we all suffer in life. Our inevitable suffering comes from many sources: disease, accident, natural disaster, exhaustion, the effects of abuse and neglect, the death of loved ones, and much more. We are often the passive "victims" of these causes of suffering. Jesus is not talking about this kind of involuntary suffering when he asks us to take up our crosses to follow him.

Jesus is talking about voluntarily walking in his path of self-giving love with an eyes-open willingness to experience whatever loss and pain are called for in our lives as his disciples. To take up our cross to follow Jesus means our free choice to bear one another's burdens, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to relieve human suffering, to take a stand for what is good and true and just. The exact form this takes will differ for each of us and changes with time and circumstance. But the basic choice is what Jesus puts before us: is our top priority to save our own lives or are we willing to risk ourselves and deny ourselves for the love of Jesus and his teaching? Do we have a "me orientation" or a "Jesus orientation"?

It is extremely unlikely that any of us will be called to die for Jesus and the Gospel. But we are often called to make a choice between our own desires and comfort and giving

ourselves voluntarily to help others. I think we need to reflect on our behavior, as individuals and as a church, and ask ourselves some difficult questions. How is our behavior impacting our neighbors – in our families, our workplaces, our parish, the world? What are we saying? What are we doing? What are we willing to give, to share?

The message of the Gospel is not a glorification of suffering itself. The message of the Gospel is love – God’s love for us, our love for God, our love for our neighbors. Jesus calls us to give our lives for his sake and the sake of the Gospel message of love. Doing this may very well cause us to suffer. Choosing love can be difficult, sometimes painful, and often unrewarded in human terms. But to choose “to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us” is to choose God’s glorious way.

Now let’s turn our attention to the Letter of James. This letter is like a sermon that makes connections between the message of the Gospel and human experience and behavior. Our passage today speaks about the tongue and its power. James goes straight to the heart of the matter: “With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”

Strong language aimed at a community of followers of Jesus, people who were using their voices to worship God, people like us. But that’s not all they were using their voices for. They were also using their voices for harm. Now, we may not actually “curse” others. But are any of us innocent of using our tongues for harm? Do we gossip? Do we speak ill of others? Do we say what is untrue? Do we spread harsh criticism of the people we work with, the people in the pews with us? Do we do damage with our tongues? This passage reminds me of our recent Gospel passage when Jesus teaches that it is what comes out of a person that defiles a person. Surely our speech may be in that category. James is reminding us that when we use our tongues to harm others, we are harming God’s creatures. Can it be right to use our tongues to praise the Lord and hurt the Lord’s beloved children? Certainly not.

The instructor of a Defensive Driving course I took many years ago said, “Driving is the most dangerous thing you do, and you do it every day.” Perhaps we may paraphrase James in these terms. “Speaking is the most dangerous thing you do, and you do it every day.” We speak to one another face to face, over the telephone, by email and text. When we don’t pay attention to how we are using our speech and make good choices – just as when we don’t pay attention to how we drive – dreadful results can occur. We can harm ourselves and others terribly. This is not the Gospel way of love.

Our church tradition teaches that we may fail in basically two ways: by doing something we should not have done and by failing to do what we should have done. We may use our power either for evil or for good. James focuses on the dangers of the tongue, how we use it to do what we should not do. I think we also need to look at our failures to use the tongue for good. How often are we using the power of speech to encourage one another? To express our sympathy and compassion? To express our appreciation of someone? To thank someone? Here at St. Columba’s are we actively using the power of speech to build one another up and to build up the body of Christ? If we are not doing that, then our silence is causing harm. And that is not the Gospel way of love.

Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God. We can ask for no better teacher, no better leader. May God help us to learn from him and follow him on the Gospel way of love in all that we say and all that we do. Amen.