

Weekend of Sunday, September 12, 2021
16th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 24/Proper 19/Year B

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a

Second Reading: James 3:1-12

Gospel Reading: Mark 8:27-38

Sermon Title: “James – Brother of Jesus, Apostle of Christ – Part 3”

Theme

This text uses various images to illustrate how damaging and hurtful the way we speak to and about others can be. Not only are we to control our speech, but what we say and how we say it are to reflect our faith.

Text – James 2:14-18

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Theme

This story provides the turning point in Mark’s gospel. Peter is the first human being in the narrative to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, but he cannot accept that as the Messiah Jesus will have to suffer. Moreover, Jesus issues a strong challenge to all by connecting discipleship and the cross.

Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

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.”

Introduction

The story of James, the author of the Letter of James, has fascinated me for a long time. Imagine being the half-brother to Jesus Christ!

Well, we have been presented with an opportunity to explore him, and his relationship with his big brother, and his ministry. For this and the next two weeks, the Epistle Readings are from the Letter of James.

As has been my pattern with sermon series, I will begin each week with some discovery into some issues about James, but then get into the actual passage from the Letter of James prescribed for the week.

The third issue we have to contend with is the question, “When Did James Come to Faith?”

Do you think that you could convince one of your siblings into believing that you’re the Son of God? Unless they were three years old, it would probably be a tough sell. After all, they’ve seen how you keep your room. So it’s a pretty amazing historical fact that Jesus’ brother James, who probably wore Jesus’ hand-me-downs, later became an apostle of Christ. And we know that he was sincere about his belief because he died for it. James’ martyrdom was recorded in Christian sources but also by the 1st-century Jewish historian Josephus – but that is the issue for week five.

James is silent on the subject of his own conversion; we will find no conversion story in the scriptures. However, several texts prove that he came to faith in his big brother Jesus as the Christ, and at least one of them will lead us to when and how his conversion took place.

Both Mark and John tell us that James wasn’t always a believer in Jesus as Christ.

In Mark (3:21) we read that Jesus’ siblings thought he was out of his mind. In John (7:3-5) we read that Jesus’ brothers mocked him and didn’t believe in him. While these verses don’t explicitly name James, he was likely included in these stories. This is quite an embarrassing admission from two gospel writers. One would think that the early church wouldn’t want to reveal that one of their chief leaders was a

former mocking skeptic, but Bible scholars point to this very notion as proof that it must be true.

James was a first-hand eye-witness of the resurrected Jesus!

In defending the resurrection of the dead to the church of Corinth, Paul quoted an early Christian tradition he received from the other apostles and first-hand eyewitnesses. He mentioned resurrection appearances including James (1 Corinthians 15:7). Well, that would explain James' sudden change of belief!

James endorsed Paul's gospel.

In Galatians (2:9) we read that Paul met with several members of the Jerusalem Council and they gave his message the stamp of their approval. The Jerusalem Council included James. This is a big deal because Paul preached that Jesus was not just the Christ, God's Messiah, but also the God of Israel.

Paul's James-endorsed-gospel also included Jesus' Davidic roots.

Think about it for a second. The Jewish belief was that the Messiah would come from the line of David (2 Samuel 7:12–16, Isaiah 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5–6). If they, Jesus' family, weren't of the Davidic line, James would have easily straightened Paul out (Romans 1:3-4). And we know that Jews were fanatical about keeping genealogies.

James and Jesus' other brothers traveled abroad preaching the gospel.

While James was a leader in the Jerusalem church, he and Jesus' other brothers (Joseph, Simon, and Judas among others) were busy traveling and preaching to the point where Paul mentioned it in passing to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:5).

If Jesus' family had not also converted and became part of the spreading of the gospel throughout the Roman empire, it would have been difficult for Matthew and Luke to come along later and invent a story like Jesus' virgin birth and pass it off as gospel truth without the family's knowledge and approval. But as it is, the gospels must have had the family's endorsement.

So, we learn from early Christian and non-Christian sources that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to James and that caused a sudden turnaround and belief that his brother was the Christ, God's Messiah, the divine Son of Man, co-equal to the God of Israel. And we know he believed it because he dedicated his life to proclaiming it, even to the point of death.

Christian apologists tend to focus a lot on the conversion of Paul and rightfully so, but we shouldn't neglect James. While Paul was close to the events of scripture, Jesus' brother James was even closer in a way that Paul wasn't. And even the non-Christian historian, Josephus, stood up and took notice of his witness. This kind of historical evidence shouldn't be underappreciated.

Sermon

Turning our attention to today's study of the prescribed passage, James gave a strongly worded teaching to his readers about control of their tongues and mouths and how their control, or lack thereof, reflects their faith.

In verse one, James was speaking specifically of teachers of the faith – in other words, James is speaking to me and my colleagues. You have a right to expect right teaching from your pastor. Back in seminary, my professors referred to the “holy man syndrome”, this idea that when it comes to issues of faith, many people acquiesce to the holy man, the pastor. In a gathering, people defer to me for an opening or closing prayer. People defer to me on many decisions, some of which I have no opinion on, or I don't think I should have an opinion on.

You probably didn't even notice that the lighting in the Narthex has been changed out from the old broken-down fluorescent wood beams to what are called wafer lights. When it comes to architectural lighting, I am not the person to defer to – Becky Tennant who is educated and has made a career out of doing that kind of thing is a much better choice.

And back to the issue about which I should be the local expert, issues of faith and theology, you have a right to expect me to be orthodox – to transmit the Christian faith from a Lutheran perspective, as it has been taught me by the theologians and teachers of the Lutheran Church. You have a right to expect that I will not go rogue and teach something else.

Perhaps you can imagine that it hasn't always been that way. Especially when the Christian movement was young. Let me remind you that Christianity was not a documented religion – Jesus didn't leave a book of theology. It is a revealed religion, meaning that as time went by, the apostles and early church fathers documented what they experienced and made doctrine from that.

You may recall from my recent sermon series on First Corinthians that the apostle Paul had to do damage control from those he called "super-apostles," opponents who infiltrated the Corinthian church with a different gospel other than the one Paul taught. About those who take on the mantle of leadership in teaching, James wrote, those ¹who teach will be judged with greater strictness. You might think that that makes me nervous. It does not, because I am pretty secure in my orthodoxy and rely on the structure of the church to keep me in line. Just my opinion, but the preachers you need to worry about are the self-taught self-ordained preachers of independent churches. Who has oversight over them?

James used the metaphor of a bridle. I'm not a horse fancier, but what he means is that for human beings, the tongue and mouth seem to govern human behavior. It is not our arms or feet that get us into trouble, it is our tongues and mouths, so we human beings need to learn to bridle them to keep our whole body from sinning. But a bridle is such a small thing, compared to the size of a horse, you say. Right you are! James wrote on to say the same thing is true for the relatively large ship that is guided by the relatively small rudder. Our mouths and tongues can get our whole persons into trouble.

He wrote on that all species of animals have been tamed by human beings and yet, we cannot tame "the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Wow! What powerful words, and yet we know it is true. We can get so upset and/or careless that we say things we later regret – but the words cannot be unsaid or unheard.

By the way, did you hear that Youngstown's mayor and chief of police think that most of the recent violence is coming from two feuding families? This is what can happen when one person or party disrespects another.

James pointed out that the tongue and the mouth are not all bad. It is what we use to bless the Lord with hymns and songs of praise. We use them to offer our prayers of supplication for ourselves and others. We use them to express thanks and

compassion, praise and encouragement to our loved ones and to people we don't even know. James pondered, isn't it amazing that the mouth and tongue can produce both the best behavior and the worst.

I admire people who don't say too much. Listen carefully: I didn't say I admire people who don't have much to say –what I said was, I admire people who don't say too much. There is a big difference.

My father-in-law is an expert at this. He will often strike up a conversation with a stranger who is doing something or knows something he is curious about. And when he is talking to them he is genuinely interested and that permits the other to tell what they know about a given subject. In this way, Dale, my father-in-law, uses his tongue and mouth to elevate the spirit of the other.

Last Monday, Labor Day, Carol and I went to the Canfield Fair and we were walking through the dairy cattle area and I had questions: Why do they bring several of their herd to the fair when it is obviously a real inconvenience to the farmer, the farmer's family, and the cows. So I struck up a conversation with a dairy farmer from Salem and I learned that like anything else a person gets interested in, it can turn into a competition. There is a dairy association and they compete in various aspects of dairy farming. Some aspects can lead to prestige or a better reputation that yields higher prices for their cows and their milk. Other aspects include its just competition among farmers and bragging rights for those who do well. Who knew? I was fascinated. And until I asked questions and let the farmer talk, I had no idea. I'm pretty sure that as I walked away, that farmer stood just a little taller – "I know something. Yea, that's right, come to me with your dairy questions."

However, we all know people who, like Dwight Schrute from The Office or Cliff Clavin from Cheers who seem to just yammer on about anything, whether they have any real knowledge or experience to share or not. Their behavior is rude and obnoxious. When we are in the company of others, we should give everyone air time. As I said, I admire people who don't say too much.

And we all know people who, it seems, cannot keep their tongues and mouths from working overtime spouting off about other people. Specifically, this is the sin of gossiping, and it is as old as scripture itself. James wrote that as Christians we are

to be above that. Give honor and respect to others and at the same time we bring honor and respect to ourselves.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

And last but not least, we should use our tongues and mouths to praise our God revealed in Jesus Christ and let every word that is formed by our tongues and released from our mouths be expressions that are pleasing to God and reflections of our faith.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, we give you thanks for the ministry of James, the brother of Jesus and apostle of Christ, who taught that we are to be above the hurtful and disrespectful rhetoric of the world and use our voices for the godly purposes of lifting others up and praising you. Send us your Spirit to remind us of this lesson daily. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen