

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year B – September 15, 2024

“For Disciples of Jesus, Words Matter”

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ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SOUTH BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Isaiah 50:4-9a | Psalm 116:1-8 | James 3:1-12 | Mark 8:27-38

One of the beautiful prayers in our Anglican tradition was written by Thomas Cranmer, published in the 1662 prayer book. “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...” As we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest this week’s lessons, we’re invited to explore the nature of being a teacher. Many of us are teachers at some point in our lives. What can we learn from scripture about this aspect of human life?

In the first reading, Isaiah introduced the idea of prophets as teachers. He claimed that God gave him the tongue of a teacher. God made him someone to whom people would listen. And, God “wakened his ear,” meaning that God made him able to listen not only to God, but to those around him. That rings true—good teachers are open to their students. Isaiah added that teachers should expect to be challenged. No matter how harsh the insults, how harmful the encounter, Isaiah offers reassurance that God helps teachers. They should lean on each other and stand together. Those are encouraging words.

The second reading is from the letter of James. This is not James the apostle, but Jesus’ half brother who grew up with Jesus. James was a leader of the Jerusalem church at a time when those who accepted Jesus as Messiah were persecuted. James wrote about church leaders as teachers. In a letter, he shared wisdom about how teachers should be in community. He drew his wisdom from two sources: the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Proverbs, especially the first nine chapters.

In the letter, James called on his people to follow Jesus' summary on the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), that they should love God and love their neighbors. James' letter has twelve short teachings that call God's people to be devoted the way of Jesus. These teachings stand alone, but they're also held together with repeated keywords and themes. The first teaching is about favoritism and love. To Jesus, showing favoritism toward people who benefit us, while ignoring those in need, is the opposite of love. That person's faith is dead. Genuine faith is always obedient to Jesus' teachings.

James offered three teachings on the theme that words matter. The second teaching that we heard this morning reminds us that teachers will be held to higher standards, and their mistakes will be judged more harshly. Teachers are held accountable for what they say. Their words can have devastating effect. James used at least seven metaphors to show this: how bits work in the mouths of horses, how rudders work on ships, how small fires cause big fires, how humans tame wild animals, how no single spring pours forth two kinds of water, how fig trees do not produce olives, nor grapevines figs.

The opposite is true as well. Many of us probably have stories of teachers whose blessing we carried with us for the rest of our lives. James wrote: "From the same mouth come blessings and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." If we claim to have faith in Jesus, but our actions—things done and left undone—don't match our words, our faith is not genuine. If we praise God on Sunday mornings and then judge and criticize those around us, we are not obeying Jesus' teachings. How we talk about people reflects the sincerity and integrity of our faith. In a later chapter, James wrote, "let your yes mean yes." Our words reveal our true character and core values.

Not everyone is cut out for this work, because, James wrote, “we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For 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.” Now, you might be thinking, nobody’s perfect. James uses that word seven times in his letter. In Hebrew and in Greek, perfect refers to wholeness and integrity. It means that our actions are always consistent with the values and beliefs received through Jesus. The way to live with integrity is by forming habits and those habits begin with our thoughts and words. Anne Lamott has a way of reducing ideas to their lowest common denominator: “You can either practice being right or practice being kind.”

Here’s an example of someone whose habit of using gentle language resulted in good action. I was visiting some friends, and David brought home two large pizzas. He put them in the oven to stay warm, only the heating element was on top of the oven and the boxes caught fire. He pulled them out of the oven with mitts, and swiftly carried the flaming boxes to the back patio, all the while saying, “Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh.” If he had not been in the habit of using gentle words before that moment, he might have used more colorful language.

James shared all of this wisdom knowing that church leaders are held to higher standards than all others around them and where congregations are empowered to lead and teach, the higher standards apply to them, too. If we criticize and judge, we are not obeying Jesus’ teachings.

Where does that leave us? One major reason why people leave the church or don’t return is the duplicity of Christians who aren’t living their faith. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “Many of these people can tell you the exact details of how many times they showed up at springs marked ‘Fresh Water’ with cups in hand, only to end up with mouth fulls of

salt water. You can remind them that no one is perfect. You can tell them that churches are made up of human beings, after all, and that there is always room for one more hypocrite. They still have a point. James knows they have a point.”

When church communities appear judgmental and exclusive, people leave to create their own inclusive communities, often online. Young people have a low tolerance for hypocrisy, and often find as much or more genuine love and acceptance and service to those in need outside church—in person and online.

“For all of us make mistakes,” James knows, echoing Isaiah that teachers should expect to be challenged, but as church leaders—and as disciples of Jesus—we can lean on each other and stand together in love and compassion.

Our words can bless or curse, and they can ask for forgiveness. In a few minutes, we will say the confession, when think about the ways we have not loved God or our neighbor in “thought, word, and deed.” The best way to live as disciples is to hold our own selves to higher standards, to practice speaking in ways we would like to act, and to hold ourselves accountable to God and each other when we fall short. We choose our words carefully because God has given each of us the authority to teach about Jesus, to continue his ministries, and to build up the body of Christ.