

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 15, September 13, 2009, dedicated in thanksgiving for his ministry to Mark S. Williams, director of Christian Education at First Congregational Church on this day of installation, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Who Are You?”**

### **James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The great Rabbi Abraham Heschel has said, "Speech has power. Words do not fade." The words we use have power. They have power to heal or to hurt. They have power to deform or transform the spirit of others. They have power to soothe or disturb those who receive them.

John Milton writes this of “Apt words” in *Samson Agonistes*:

*Apt words have power to suage  
The tumors of a troubled mind,  
And are as balms to festered wounds.  
He's gone, and who knows how he may report  
Thy words by adding fuel to the flame?*

**Words are even more powerful tools in the holy scriptures.** Here they have the power to change the world, fueled by the power of God’s Holy Spirit. Today, we encounter Jesus and the disciples at the pivotal point of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is turning his body, mind, soul and words away from teaching, preaching and healing in Galilee to

suffering, dying and rising in Jerusalem. He asks the disciples for an “intelligence report.”

“Who do they say that I am?” asks Jesus. The answers fly back, “John the Baptist . . . Elijah . . . the prophet.” Then he asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “The Messiah.” Jesus tells them to say nothing to anyone about this.

Then he talks some more. He teaches them about the Messiah – the one who suffers, dies, is buried and is raised in three days. He then calls Peter out for blurting out the name “*Messiah*” and calls the crowds to follow him as disciples and in so doing pay the price of discipleship.

Mark 8:27-38 is packed with words . . . hopeful witnesses . . . mixed messages . . . coded language. There is chastisement for speaking and a veiled pronouncement of a prophetic witness; a definition of the cost of discipleship and a call to follow Jesus. Jesus uses words as powerful tools to draw in and drive away; to silence and to empower for discipleship.

Words have power in James 3:1-12. Here, Jesus’ brother James, having worked through the ways in which the body can serve (or not serve) Jesus as messiah (now that he is raised from the dead) in chapters one and two, comes to chapter three and addresses the tongue. Acknowledging that the tongue is a small part of the body, James develops a handful of powerful images and metaphors for the tongue. He is deeply concerned about the integrity of speech and particularly the evil power of an unbridled tongue.

James 3:1-12 is nothing less than a lament for the tongue. In 3:2 he acknowledges that we all make many mistakes and the person who makes no mistakes in speech is perfect. A person who does not err or sin in speech is truly a person of integrity. Furthermore, by failing to control one's speech, the integrity of a person is undermined. The same tongue that blesses and praises God also curses fellow humans who are made in the image of God (3:9-10) and thus curses

God. When people's tongues “wag” like this, they demonstrate that they lack value for God's creation, and they do not treat God's creatures with the respect they are due.

But, James points out, the real damage of the tongue is the damage of duplicity (3:6). How is it that a tongue can disrespect and devalue God and God's creation and also be used to speak words of love and respect? In James' mind we either speak with the heart of God or the heart of the world. We cannot serve two masters in speech or action. The duplicity of the tongue shows when it is torn between friendship with God or friendship with the world. Integrity of faith demands that we pay attention to our speech and our use of words, for we cannot serve two masters.

Perhaps we would do well to hear and live into the words of admonition from Jewish writer Jesus ben Sirach, the writer of *Ecclesiasticus*:

*Honor and shame is in talk; and the tongue of man is his fall. Be not called a whisperer, and lie not in wait with the tongue; for a foul shame is upon the thief, and an evil condemnation upon the double tongue.*

*Instead of a friend become not an enemy; for thereby thou shalt inherit an ill name, shame and reproach . . . Blessed is the one who has not slipped with his (or her) mouth. (Ecclesiasticus, 5:13-6, 1; 14:1, Wm. Barclay's The Letters of James and Peter, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977, pp.82-83).*

If you think these words are hard to hear, they are even harder to deliver. How I wish they would go away, so I did not have to confront my own sinfulness about the words I have used to harm others. How long do you have this day to hear my confession on my misuse of words and thus my unleashing damage upon the recipients of my condemnation?

I am ashamed of the ways and times I have used words to hurt, to wound, to disrespect, devalue and degrade God's creation and thus to degrade God. I am ashamed of words I have chosen to describe others and their behaviors, often demeaning them in the process. And the words of James 3:1 weigh heaviest upon me as a teacher of the Gospel. He writes, "Not many of you should become teachers, brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." For the times I have harmed others with words, I ask forgiveness.

On this day in which we begin our Christian education program year and install Mark Williams as our "teacher of teachers," according to James, we need to recognize the judgment (as well as responsibility) placed upon each of us as teachers – in classrooms, in homes, in workplace, in neighborhoods, in pulpits. We are admonished to "watch our tongues," to use them for healing not hurting. I would add to James that we also need to watch our tone of words. For tone and inflection tell as much or more about meaning as the words themselves. I pray that we will do so and God's amazing grace will embrace us in our turning from hurt to healing.

Speaking of which . . . How is your tongue? Do you need to watch your mouth?

I'd like to reflect on three nuggets of wisdom given as a gift from James to all of us today. Although James frames them in the negative, I would like to turn them to the positive. James says in 3:3-5a that although the tongue is small it is powerful. If we put bits in the mouths of horses, we can control their entire body. And as for the ship, although it is huge, it is controlled by the small rudder. So it is with the body. The tongue is small but powerful.

**First lesson, although the tongue is small, it can be a powerful, purposeful tool for good.** With the permission of his daughter, I'd like to share with you the story of a man of few words who used his tongue for purposeful, powerful good. Mr. Grady Jack Robinson was a construction worker from Oberlin, Ohio. Although he

loved learning and education and desired to be a lawyer, he had to leave school in the 8th grade to find work to support his brothers, sisters, and mother, and later his wife and four children.

Grady's daughter, Dr. Barbara Nicholson, executive director of the King Cultural Arts Center, remembers how her father would pick up and pore over law books in the evenings. In fact, she says her two brothers, her sister and she would use the thick books for booster seats at the dinner table. Perhaps her brothers are both attorneys today because they were raised on the law! Anyway, Barbara referred to her father as "the Supreme Court." Although her mom was the court of appeals, her father's word was final. He was man of few words, but when he spoke that was it!

Some time back, Barbara recalled this story of her childhood. In her hometown of Oberlin was a man named Mr. Joe West. Joe was known by all to be the town drunk. The children teased him and made fun of him. One day her father caught her doing this. He said, "No one knows the trouble Mr. West has seen. He doesn't need our troubles, too. He needs our respect and love. When you see Mr. West, you will always refer to him as 'Mr. West.' If he has fallen, lend him a hand. Help him home. If he is drunk, offer to assist him. But, you will never laugh at him or be disrespectful to him again." The Supreme Court had issued its final opinion.

Today, the children of Mr. Grady Jack Robinson are leaders in their community and in this nation. Two are outstanding attorneys who now use the law to "lift-up" others as they follow Grady's dream, two are teachers/professors, who followed their mother's vocation and Barbara who has transformed our city through her long and loving leadership of the King Center. We are blessed in our lives by parents and teachers who raise us in this way. Although the tongue is small, it can be a purposeful, powerful tool for good!

**Second, words can set the soul on fire!** James 3:5b,6 speaks of words, when out of control, setting the forest ablaze. A small spark and ignite a vast fire, James says. But I would like to re-frame (and re-

flame) this as well. Yes, words can hurt and destroy vast territories, but words can also heal and mend huge numbers of broken hearts.

On this day, in which we celebrate our 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Open and Affirming, I would like to share a story from nine years ago in which I witnessed the power of words to heal vast numbers of people. Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, of the Diocese of Detroit, acknowledged his sin and the sin of the Roman Catholic Church to hurt through word and deed persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. As he spoke of his own gay brothe, Dan, Gumbleton revealed his soul to us and his own failings to be present to those who are created by God as beautiful, but different. I remember still his simple, but eloquent words. He spoke of his mother, his siblings, his brother and himself. He shared letters from parents of gay children, gay priests and lay people. An obviously hesitant and somewhat reluctant advocate, more than 400 people sat in silence as he shared how he had grown and taken steps to help his fellow bishops grow in welcoming and accepting gay persons in the fellowship of Christian faith.

For generations, words have used in the church and by the church to wound and divide people. I have used such words. You have used such words. We divide people by theological categories, by racial commentaries, by socioeconomic categories, by stereotyping, by sexual orientations, by any number of ways that exclude. The day I heard Bishop Gumbleton, he used careful, almost surgical use of language, suturing the wounded body of Christ back together. Through gentle, kind, confessional words, Bishop Gumbleton spoke with the words of God – asking forgiveness, offering mercy and love for others, quietly, gently, courteously mending what the church had severely torn asunder.

I believe our words need to be added to the balm in Gilead to heal the wounds of those too long cast out and ill-treated by the church because speech has power, words do not fade.

Please listen carefully to my words now. I speak for myself and

hopefully others. I am sorry for the ways that words spoken in the Christian church that have deeply wounded you. I can't tell you how many times I have simply wanted to hold you as you have told me stories of pain, hurt, abandonment, and estrangement in times of your lives when you needed grace, healing and love. I have also witnessed the silent embraces of people here who have helped knit you back together by the power of the Holy Spirit. For me, it has been like watching the sparks of the Holy Spirit touch the kindling, and the fire kindled therein touching the sticks and the logs to create a powerful, healing light.

Since we became Open and Affirming, close to 400 men, women, and children have stood before us and been received into our fellowship, because they have felt the power of the Holy Spirit as well! They have joined trusting that healing for them has and will happen here in this, God's Cathedral of Grace! May the spark of God's Holy fire be on our lips and in our lives.

**Finally, God only knows – our tongues can be used to bless or to curse – us and others.** In one of his lesser known books, *The Living Bread*, Trappist monk Thomas Merton has written words that are as poignant and fresh in our time as they were in his:

*The whole problem of our time is the problem of love: how are we going to recover the love ourselves and to love one another? The reason why we hate one another and fear one another is that we secretly, or openly hate and fear our own selves. And we hate ourselves because the depths of our being are a chaos of frustration and spiritual misery. Lonely and helpless, we cannot be at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God. (Quoted in *Through the Year with Thomas Merton*, Image Books, 1985, p. 66).*

We cannot be a blessing to ourselves or others until we find peace with God. Does that sound like a tall order? Perhaps, but perhaps not. I would encourage each of you to find peace with God in

the way that most soothes and calms your soul.

When you are asked, "Who do they say that I am," how will you answer? In essence, "Who are you?" Who is God creating and calling you to become? How will you use your tongue to heal and not to hurt? How will you become – in word and deed – a blessing, not a curse?

As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Speech has power. Words do not fade." Please use your tongue to be a purposeful and powerful instrument of God's blessing and good. Allow God's spirit to set your words on fire for healing not hurting. Your loved ones, the strangers you meet, people in the pews and cubicles around you, in the classroom of school or home need your words as a blessing in their lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.