

From the Same Mouth
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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.”

James 3:1-12

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 yield figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Peter, who often seems to have the wrong answer, is having his moment at the beginning of our reading from Mark with the correct answer to Jesus’ question. “Who do you say that I am?” “You are the Messiah.” His joy with getting it right was short-lived, though. Unable to bear the idea of his friend, his Messiah, his savior, dying - he seems to have tuned out the “rise again” part - he tells Jesus that can’t be how it is supposed to be. And his moment is over. Jesus calls him Satan, maybe because the idea of another way tempts Jesus, or maybe simply because Peter’s mind is set on the human expectation of how things should happen, rather than being open to God’s plan. In fact, a direct translation of the line

which reads “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” is actually “for you do not think of the things of God but of the things of humans.”

One of the many gifts of the biblical witness is that it is filled with its own hero antagonists, people who seem at first like the bad guy but end up doing great things - I’ve mentioned some of them before: King David who had his mistress’ husband killed, Moses who killed a man and fled, Jacob who tricked his brother Esau. We find the same in Peter, who went on after Jesus’ death to found the church in Jerusalem. And the reason the stories of these people are gifts is because they give us hope. People like us who have made mistakes also can do great things.

This trouble of human things over God things is the same that the recipients of James’ letter suffered. As we learned last week, these people praised God but then turned around and played favorites with one another. We read today that they are blessing God and then turning around and saying unkind things about one another. “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” James writes of the untamable tongue, of its wildness and its dangers. We know, though, that our tongues are as controllable as our hands and our eyebrows and our toes. Instead, perhaps, he could have spoken of our minds or our hearts. Sometimes they carry us away...with our permission, of course. A good story is a good story - we can get wrapped up in it no matter its origin. A great book, an intriguing scientific article, a compelling news story, a beautiful lyric, a juicy bit of gossip - they all stick with us and, when we feel moved by a story, we wish to share it with others. Did you hear? Did you see? Did you read? There is a specific disappointment that comes with an affirmative response to those questions and a specific excitement when we learn that we will be the first to share the story and, hopefully, create that excitement in another. A great book, an intriguing scientific article, a compelling news story, a beautiful lyric, a juicy bit of gossip.

There are variations of a particular fable about sharers of gossip - I’ll share the one that comes out of Yiddish folklore. “One such man had told so many malicious untruths about the local rabbi that, overcome by remorse, he begged the rabbi to forgive him. ‘And, Rabbi, tell me how I can make amends.’ The rabbi sighed, ‘Take two pillows, go to the public square and there cut the pillows open. Wave them in the air. Then come back.’ The rumormonger quickly went home, got two pillows and a knife, hastened to the square, cut the pillows open, waved them in the air and hastened back to the rabbi’s chambers. ‘I did just what you said, Rabbi!’ ‘Good.’ The rabbi smiled, ‘Now, to realize how much harm is done by gossip, go back to the square...’ ‘And?’ ‘And collect all your feathers.’”¹

Just as it’s near impossible to collect feathers which have been thrown to the wind, James likens

¹ www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/gossip.htm

such spreading to a wildfire, set off by the tongue. We already know we shouldn't gossip - there's even one of the ten commandments to that effect - you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. But we, like Peter, allow ourselves to be swept up in how we think things should be, not in how God wants things to be. We, like the Hebrew Christians who received James' letter, come here and bless God and leave and curse those made in God's likeness.

There is a solution. But it's not an easy one. If it were, we wouldn't place as much value in communities of faith which strengthen us when we are weak and guide us back to what is right when we have strayed. Our human nature is to think the things of humans instead of the things of God, though we are capable of both. E. Elizabeth Johnson, in writing about James' perspective on this says, "He uses traditional Jewish theology about the two sides of human nature, our dual capacities for righteousness and for wickedness, to think about the power of language. Both the 'evil impulse' and the 'good impulse' mark human beings, according to Jewish anthropology, and the righteous life is marked by one's holding the evil impulse in check so that the good impulse leads one to do justice."²

This choosing between impulses is what Jesus speaks of when he provides the solution we seek. "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." James writes of the solution in his own way later in his letter, stating "Submit yourselves therefore to God" and "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."³ And when we need help, what guides us? What guides those around us so they guide us? The answer is Jesus Christ. We gain our hope and our inspiration and our promise and our potential from Jesus. Harry B. Adams finds that Jesus even suggests this to Peter and he writes, "Jesus' word to Peter suggests that he can and must gain another perspective, that he can set his mind on 'divine things.' In our relationship with Jesus, there is the promise and the hope that somehow the divine perspective on who we are and what we are about breaks through. In him God enables us to find a way that is different from the way of the world, enables us to discern how life is fulfilled as God intends, enables us to live by values that are not embodied in the normal course of human affairs."⁴

Take heart in the example of Peter who was like us in so many ways. More often than not Peter set his mind on human things but he had his shining moments and so can we. James' goal is admonishment and correction so he speaks mainly of the negative effects of speaking, of language. Good can come from our words as well. As Mark Douglas says, "...there is grace in language, which, like all good things, is a gift from God and a means by which we more clearly become creatures created in the image

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 65.

³ James 4:7 and James 4:8

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 72.

of the One who gives us birth by the word of truth.”⁵ Don’t forget the most powerful word of all; “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁶ While good news rarely spreads as quickly or as far as bad news and gossip, it does indeed spread. Heck, it may even spread as gossip.

Imagine doing things differently than the way of the world. Imagine trying to fulfill life as God intends. Imagine living by values that are not embodied in the normal course of human affairs. Imagine seeing someone living this way; it would certainly be something to talk about. What if we lived every day like a figure from those stories the news stations love to run around Christmas? People would talk! So let’s give them something to talk about! Let your language be used to bless and not curse. James laments “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” Truly, this ought not to be so. So let us ourselves bless and not curse and let us live lives worthy of blessing and not cursing. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: O God, please bless these words spoken here that they might prompt us to bless both you and those created in your image. Amen.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 66.

⁶ John 1:1