

Sermon for Sept. 13 2009 Mark 8

But Who do you say that I am? Asks Jesus. The Messiah, answers Peter.

Good answer says Jesus but you must keep this to yourself.

Do you realize what you are saying Peter? Asks Jesus – do you realize that this Messiah will soon be rejected by many, undergo great suffering, then will be put to death. That can't be says Peter – you are wrong Jesus. The Messiah we have been waiting for is king and ruler of all – a Messiah doesn't get killed.

It is at this point in the dialogue that those harsh words of Jesus appear.

Get behind me Satan. First of all just to clarify – Jesus is not calling Peter Satan – he is speaking to the human sinfulness that is not allowing Peter to see the divine. For at that moment Jesus knows that Peter and the disciples have no idea what it truly means to follow him and he's got to get them prepared because the cross is coming. Jesus is letting the disciples know that following this Messiah's road is going to involve some rough terrain.

This explains why after Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone about him. For Jesus knew that, since the disciples themselves did not understand what Jesus as the Messiah meant, the words they would have used to tell others about him would have been all wrong. So he instructed them to hold their tongues until after the resurrection.

Following Jesus on that road to the cross takes on many different meanings for each weary traveler on that journey.

Yes indeed, we all know that following Christ to Calvary involves painful events in life including physical suffering resulting many times in death; however, the road to the cross can be difficult in other ways as well. In our Epistle today James points out that picking up our cross to follow Christ may mean changing the way we live day to day and this too, at least at first, can be a rough road to travel.

In his letter, James counts on real life to help him make his point. One of his several real life examples compares a horses bridle and bit to the use of language.

Our nine-year-old daughter Amanda loves to ride horses. This scared my husband to death at first, but now after two years of lessons he has at least accepted it.

I do remember one time after a lesson, not too long ago, our daughter came home and told me she fell off the horse. Fortunately she was not injured. I asked her how it happened and she replied “I lost the reigns while the horse was cantering and the horse took off out of control.” She lost the reigns. The reigns - which are attached to the bridle which is attached to the bit –which controls and guides the horse. One small slip of my daughters hands and things became out of control and very dangerous.

In his letter James reminds us that with one slip of the tongue, one misspoken moment things can become out of control and very dangerous. Both the gospel and the Epistle point out that that choice of whether to speak or hold our tongues, and the words that we decide to let out of our mouths can produce very large results either for good or for ill.

We've all heard the sayings:

If you don't have something nice to say don't say anything at all. Loose lips sink ships. Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. That one is not true. The weapon of nasty words can hurt just as much as sticks and stones, in some cases even more so.

We often forget the importance of words. It is often too easy to be quick with the tongue and lash out at someone with whom we are angry. The words are unleashed and before we know it, it is too late to take back what has been said.

In our gospel lesson from two weeks ago Jesus gave us a long list of ugly evil things that cause much damage when they come out of a person. Slander was one of them. Two of the Ten Commandments direct us to think about the words we speak. When we speak wrong, untruthful, hateful words about someone else, when we gossip, when we take the lord's name in vain, when we bear false witness against our neighbor – when we do any of these things there is great potential for causing

irreparable damage.

On the other hand, words can be used for much good. When we speak out of love, and kindness and compassion it will bear fruit. And when our spoken words bear fruit it will be reflected by our actions.

We have all also heard the saying, actions speak louder than words. And this is true -harm is done by speech that is unrelated to faithful action. When we speak faithful words but do not live as we speak, then the once again our tongues are causing damage. Last week we heard from James – that faith without works is dead – the same is true for words and action – they go hand in hand.

A community whose speech reflects the gospel will show it by their actions. A community whose words speak about helping those in need will make those important words true by helping those in need. A community who speaks about loving God and loving neighbor will make those vital words true by living a life that reflects that love.

In the end, the Epistle and the gospel lesson certainly are speaking about more than just our manner of speech. When we drop the reigns that guide us in the direction of Christ we lose control and the journey becomes dangerous. When we hold on to those reigns of Christ we are able to guide our lives in the direction of love, peace and joy regardless of the rough spots on the road.

Our words and actions combined reflect what road we are travelling. Who do you say that I am, Jesus asks each one of us. You are the Messiah – we answer. Then come, says Jesus, pick up your cross and follow me. For the road may be long and the path may be rough, but if you hold on to the reigns of Christ,