

Candidacy Sermon: "Let My Words Be Few"
Sunday, September 16, 2018
Scripture Readings: James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38
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Our first reading comes from the Epistle of James, the author whom Paul (Saul of Tarsus) declares as a 'pillar' of the church.¹ Hear these words from James chapter 3, verses 1 through 12.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² 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. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or 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. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

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

Our second scripture reading comes from the gospel of Mark, chapter 8:27-38. We are continuing to follow the account of Jesus and his interactions with people around him through the eyes of Mark. Hear now the Word of God.

²⁷ Jesus 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?" ²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then 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. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke

¹ Galatians 2:9 (NRSV)

him. ³³ But 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.”

³⁴ He 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those 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.”

Text: He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Mark 8:29a

As I prepared for this trip and this sermon, our country reflected what September 11 means to us. It was a day of mourning and remembering, as there were many memorial services across the country, news media reporting growing sickness of first responders², and people sharing where and what they were doing during the moment when the planes hit the World Trade Center. I remember being at U of I, sharing the surreal event unfolding on the TV monitors with friends, trying to make sense of all that was taking place as well as the changes that were heading our way. This year on 9/11, 17 years after the incident, someone asked a question that I have never dealt with before - a local pastor during weekly prayer gathering asked how we are going to share about this event that forever changed our lives to the new generation of youth that has no idea what it was like prior. He was asking about how we are going to shape this major event's impact: he was asking about how we are going to shape the legacy of this day.

Have you ever dealt with a similar question before? Have you had a chance to explain to a younger person, perhaps your children or grandchildren? Those who cannot rent a car yet,³ have you ever asked what it was like prior to the day the Twin Towers collapsed? If so, what did you learn from people's stories and how did it shape your understanding of this day?

The truth is that we participate in the creation of a person's legacy by the way we honor our memories of them: storytelling of the great shared-moments, their accomplishments, the depth of the relationship and their connection to you, to name a few. Springfield is a champion of creating and keeping a great legacy. When a small child living halfway around the globe in South Korea is inspired by reading about a man named Abraham Lincoln, this town played a

² Dunn, L., & Fox, M. (2018, September 11). 9/11 first responders begin to feel attack's long-term health effects. Retrieved September 12, 2018, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/9-11-anniversary/9-11-first-responders-begin-feel-attack-s-long-term-n908306>

³ Minimum legal age to rent a vehicle is 21 in 48 states with exceptions in the U.S. This seems to be a good age cutoff to remember the actual event of September 11, 2001. Please refer to <https://www.enterprise.com/en/help/faqs/car-rental-under-25.html> for additional information.

part bringing such legacy across the largest body of water. I am not sure if this is a fact or not, but what I am sure of is that I am not the only one who thinks Abraham Lincoln must be the tallest president, matching his greatness in human history. Westminster is no different. This place is full of legacies of previous saints all around us. From its rich beginnings written in its session minutes to church's current missional outreach; from stained glass windows to the handcrafted pew covers and veteran memorials, this church is also a treasure-trove of legacies being kept and passed forward.

Likewise, in today's scripture, Jesus is asking his disciples, who do you think I am, what impact have I made, what are you going to tell others about me, and through your story, what are people going to remember me by? – even the ones that never met me? In other words, Jesus is asking what is my legacy going to be through you?

Jesus has shown his powers to the disciples through various miracles, healings, and knowledge beyond human understanding. Just to remind us of his work, chapter 8 of Mark begins with a story of Jesus feeding a crowd of 4000 men with seven loaves of bread and few small fish, which points to the earlier miracle of feeding 5000 men with a kid's lunch box. In the middle of Mark chapter 8, Jesus restores blind man's eyes. At first, he sees people as walking trees, but after Jesus covering the eyes with his hands a second time, the former blind man was able to see things clearly. I often wonder if that correction was necessary, but that is a discussion to be had another time.

According to today's Scriptures, people who followed Jesus, those who have also witnessed miracles and was touched by his parables, thought Jesus and John the Baptist were the same fully (not-divine) human person, whom Jesus declared to be the greatest born on earth.⁴ Some thought Jesus was the latest messenger sent by God, just like the list of prophets in the times of Judges before the kings of Israel were chosen. However, they must have recognized the greatness and the power of Jesus that they contributed the highest honor in the category of prophets and named him Elijah.

Then comes the saving of legacy moment. When the others did not understand the importance of Jesus, when he asks his disciples the same question, Peter answers with the famous 4 words: "You are the Messiah". With these few words, Peter correctly identified Jesus as not simply a healer, a great rabbi, a prophet, but Christ – the anointed one, Son of God, a fully divine yet fully human.

However, what seemed to be the understanding of Jesus' legacy was short-lived. Even Peter, through whom Christ built his church⁵, was not able to comprehend the full legacy of Jesus. Shouldn't we consider Jesus' legacy as the one who brought the eternal Truth to us? Jesus is the embodiment of the Good News, the Gospel that we are all called to be the witness to

⁴ Matthew 11:11 (NRSV)

⁵ Matthew 16:18 (NRSV)

and to preach: the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Crucified. Yet, when Jesus started teaching his disciples about his upcoming suffering and death which he must endure for the resurrection, Peter took Jesus to a side and begin to rebuke him!⁶ Can you imagine an attorney in a court hearing calling for a sidebar to tell the judge that the judgement is ludicrous? In this modern-day equivalent, contempt of court would be the least of worries. Matthew 15:18 tells us “the things that comes out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defiles them.” If the saying, ‘our eyes are the window to our souls’, then this passage tells us that our words are the window to our hearts. Although I do sincerely believe that Peter said those words out of love for Jesus, we must think about the basis of human tendencies and the power of words that can bring either glory or detriment to the Gospel that we love so much.

Our other Scripture reading from James reminds us that our tongue is a powerful portion of our body and we must use it wisely.

⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

This passage points out the truth of our hearts being divided. Inside each of us, we have the heavenly battle between good and evil, of the flesh and of the spirit. Peter used few words to lift-up Jesus as the Messiah but wanted to change Jesus’ mind about dying on the cross because of his desire of keeping him safe, only thinking in earthly terms. We are no exception. Much like Peter, we sincerely and faithfully declare Jesus as our Lord and Savior. More often, however, rather than listening for God’s will and guidance, our spoken and unspoken words are asking, and sometimes demanding God of the things that we wish for. Rather than trusting God’s divine timing, wisdom, and direction, we choose to doubt, complain, and turn to our own understanding. As Ecclesiastes 5:2 eloquently states, “Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.”⁷ How could we dare to understand God’s will, when our best thoughts cannot match to the foolishness of God? Therefore, let us ask the Lord to let my words be few and fully trust in the Lord.

Continuing the theme of Ecclesiastes 5, we must ask that our words be few because our words must be vows that we keep to the Lord. How often do we keep our “yes” be ‘yes,’ and our ‘no,’ ‘no’?⁸ Even when we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, to what degree are we holding up our end of the bargain when we say, “let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?⁹ Let us ask the Lord to let my words be few and make every word count.

⁶ Mark 8:31-32 (NRSV)

⁷ Proverbs 10:19 also echoes the same wisdom.

⁸ Matthew 5:37 (NKJV) ³⁷ But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.” This reference matches what was said within Mark 8, calling the act out Peter and referring him to be the Satan through his act of rebuking Jesus.

⁹ Matthew 6:10 (NIV)

The most important reason of asking for ‘let my words be few’, however, is so that we may exemplify Jesus’ glory and love through our deeds.¹⁰ If someone or a major event creates a legacy, the people who adheres to it is forever transformed to emulate and incorporate the values into their own lives. Many of us believe the values of President Abraham Lincoln upheld highly and consider it a human right – that all persons are created equal. In memory of September 11, 2001, citizens of the United States of America learned to come together and fight against such a tyranny, exemplified by the passengers of flight 93, daring first responders risking it all to save others, and people coming together in churches to support one another in prayer. As Christians, we are called to be God’s ambassadors; God is making [God’s] appeal through us, for it is Christ’s love that control us.¹¹ John 6:63 tells us that words Jesus gave us are full of spirit and life. Our actions must also be holy and set apart from other worldly actions, brimming full of God’s Holy Spirit and life. We must be workers who embody both God’s hands and feet; wearing the shoes of peace that comes from the Good News so that we will be fully prepared to do the deeds with our hands that will bear the mark of God’s fingerprints.¹²

So, are you ready to ask the Lord to “let my words be few” with me this morning? It does seem like a tall task to ask, especially regarding living according to Jesus’ legacy. But here is the good news for all of us this morning. Jesus promised that he will abide with us if we abide in him and in his love. When that takes place, we can ask for whatever we wish, and it will be done for us.¹³ Are we not abiding in Christ when we are looking at his gospel and legacy, not only to believe but to act on them? If so, it is not us who will be carrying on the weight of upkeeping Jesus’ legacy, but it will be Godself along with Jesus who dwells within us doing the heavy lifting. In fact, we will be the benefactors of witnessing the living gospel at work around us with our spiritual eyes open. May the Spirit of the living God who passed on the legacy of Jesus for generations before us through our spiritual ancestors be also with us and many more generations to come. Amen.

¹⁰ James 2:14-26 (NRSV) Faith without deeds is dead.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:20 and 5:14 (NLT)

¹² Ephesians 6:15 (NLT)

¹³ John 15:7 (NRSV)