

Sermon – Small Fires

Scripture – James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

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Our first reading continues the letter from James to the entire Christian church that we read last week. Here, in the third chapter of James, verses 1 through 12, James continues to instruct Christians of every time and place on the importance of working to live our faith in deed and in word, despite the realities of human error. Hear now the Word of God.

1 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. Amen.

Our gospel reading, from Mark, chapter 8, verses 27 through 38, also continues from our reading last week. After having encountered the Syro-Phoenician woman and having opened the ears and tongue of a deaf man, Jesus and his disciples continue to travel. Today, we hear the first proclamation of where their journey is taking them, as Jesus tells the disciples of his coming suffering, death, and resurrection for the first time. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

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 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." This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: “Small Fires”

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

Let us pray: Loving God, open our ears to hear your Word and draw us closer to you, that we may be one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ. And may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Someone somewhere has quite the sense of humor, for this is the opening of our first reading on the PCUSA’s Christian Education Sunday. And to read it the day we commission our Sunday school teachers! It certainly makes those wonderful folk look even more courageous than we already know them to be.

Now, as you may have noticed from our readings from James today and last week, James is a little intense. He CARES so deeply about following Christ and about living his faith, and so clearly wants others to join him. He believes what he says—that he, like all teachers, will be judged more strictly—and in the intensity of his writing we hear how strongly he feels the weight of the responsibility of teaching the Christian life. Part of his intensity comes from his use of sweeping declarations, his many rhetorical questions, and his vivid imagery, which shows up in today’s reading. He is writing on the large scale impact of small things—the effect of a bridle on a horse, or a rudder on a ship—small objects with great control over things large and powerful. Just the tiniest move of a rudder has an enormous effect on the ship, no matter how large. Just so, James says, does the tongue, no matter its size, have a great impact. The tongue is a small fire, he tells us, which can spark a great blaze—so small a thing to cause so great a consequence.

Our text from Mark focuses on a moment of one such spark—a small moment, a small fire that will set the forest ablaze. While walking with the disciples, Jesus wants to know what others are saying about him—what fires other tongues are spreading. But he also wants to know what *they* say—“But who do YOU say that I am?” And out of the silence Peter responds, “You are the Messiah.”

And Jesus begins to tell them what this means—about the suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. And, the text tells us, he says all this “quite openly”. He says it so openly that Peter panics. Peter, whose small fire sparked this news of the Messiah, is aghast at the size of the blaze his tongue has set, and so he pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him—he tries to take it back, to pour water on this growing fire, to silence Jesus for all their sakes. But Jesus refuses to be silent. Not only does he scold Peter, he raises his voice and calls the crowd, and tells ALL what it will mean to follow him. And the great blaze that will become the church is sparked.

Now, if we listen very hard, I’m fairly sure we can hear James protesting angrily across the centuries. For James does not mean the small fire of the tongue to be positive. I feel it wouldn’t be fair to this great Christian teacher if we didn’t acknowledge what it was precisely that he meant. A bridle, a rudder—these are objects of **control**. But a great blaze once set is beyond easy control. And so the fire of the tongue is a poison to the whole body, James writes, and is set by the fire of hell itself.

And in many ways, he is right—we all make mistakes, no matter how well-intentioned, and often those mistakes come from speaking when we should have kept silent, or from saying something we shouldn’t. Far too often we use our tongues to speak ill of others, to cause pain—to curse those made in God’s image. And James is right to be troubled by this tendency of ours to bless God with

the same tongue we use to harm God's children. His point is well made, and should cause us to reflect on how we speak, and how we might better tame our tongues.

And yet, I can't shake this moment from the gospel of Mark. I can't shake the fact that Jesus asked his disciples to find their voices and name him—that he refused to be silenced by Peter's fear, and raised his voice to teach the entire crowd about the coming of the Son of Man, no matter what uncontrollable blaze he set.

Didn't God appear to Moses in the fire of the burning bush? Didn't the Holy Spirit arrive in tongues of flame and give voices to the frightened disciples hiding in an upper room? God has shown up with fire before.

So we take James' warning seriously, and examine our lives for the places and ways in which we cause harm to God's beloved children. But Jesus invites us to be small fires and SPEAK. Jesus asks us questions—not rhetorical devices meant to make a point—but questions meant to be answered. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks us, leaving space for us to speak, to free our tongues and cause great things to happen. Who do you say that Christ is? How much easier to be silent! How much easier to never speak, to never be wrong, to make sure we never curse and cause harm.

But Jesus will not let us be silent. With his love, Christ sets our hearts on fire and asks us to speak, to find our voices so that our tongues might be small fires and set a great blaze of blessings for all made in God's image.

Amen.