Tongue-Taming and Life-Losing Peace Presbyterian Church

James 3:1-12 & Mark 8:34-37 After Pentecost

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Sticks and stones may break my bones, but….words can never hurt me. Some of us were taught these words to try to de-sensitize us to the pain of ridicule, name-calling of childhood. When we were bullied with words, we fired back with the line that we deep down we knew was not true, but somehow it made us feel more powerful in the moment. The tongue is made up of eight muscles and has no bones, but it is strong enough to break a heart, the most needed muscle in the body. So I heartily agree with this re-make of the aphorism. “Sticks and stones

may break my bones, but heartless words cut deeper; For wood and stone

harm flesh alone, but language costs are steeper.” (Casey Thomas)

Friday night about forty of us viewed and discussed the film, “I Can Only Imagine” the story behind the very popular Christian song by Bart Millard. A story of abuse and forgiveness, of fear and courage, of the resilience and faith of a boy whose adverse childhood experiences were transcended by God’s grace and by a miraculous transformation of his father by the Gospel. While not every story of childhood trauma has such a beautiful ending, this one was inspiring. As I watched it with this sermon in my mind, I was painfully aware of the words, the emotional abuse of Bart Millard’s father, which in my estimation was far more painful than the physical abuse. With our words, we kill the dreams of others, tear down their self-esteem, and leave scars for a lifetime. Words are powerful and enduring.

Our Stephen Ministry group listened to a Ted Talk by Brene Brown on Monday, in which she said, “You know how when you are being reviewed by someone, and you get thirty-eight positive comments and one negative one, and you forget the thirty-eight and dwell on the one negative. Brene talks about the power of being vulnerable, and how without that, we cannot feel real connection, but we avoid vulnerability because of our fear of being shamed, usually by someone’s words.

Last week’s scripture challenged us to guard dignity and encourage voice of those who are marginalized in society. Today, just as last week, we are reading from the epistle of James and the Gospel of Mark. And this week the challenge is to watch our words, examine our ego, and manage our motives. Listen for God’s word to you.

**James 3:1-12**

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. 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. 9With 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. (NRS)

James had already addressed the tongue in chapter one, when he said, “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;” He said let those who consider themselves religious keep tight reins on their tongues. Now he’s reminding those who teach and lead – you have an even greater responsibility to watch your words. There are 26 places in the scriptures, where we are warned to be careful with the words that come out of our mouths.

And he goes on for twelve verses this time about the power of the tongue – comparing it to a bridle on a horse, a rudder of a ship, and fire and deadly poison. Let’s stop there for a moment. Bridles and rudders are useful when they guide well, so the tongue when it speaks well. In this case we could simply be talking about civility, what many would say is a lost art in public discourse.

But as we see all around us, the tongue is also compared to deadly poison. Fire that burns. We would never pour poison on a person, but how often do we pour out deadly words, words that sear the heart, that remain as poison in the mind of our family members and friends. God, forgive us and help us to make amends for the damaging words we have said. Perhaps there is someone in your life who needs your apology for damaging words. Pray about that, and make sure that your apology arises from pure motives – from a desire to reconcile with them, not just your selfish need to get reassurance of their love.

Yeah, sometimes I apologize not so much because of my concern for damage I’ve done, but out of fear – fear that I will not be able to maintain a positive connection with a person. In apologizing for my words, am I losing face simply in order to gain it? Or am I doing the right thing because it is right and good? That’s where we begin to see a connection with taming the tongue and losing life.

So hear the Gospel. Just before this, Jesus asks the disciples “Who do people say that I am? Who do you say?” Peter gives the right answer – You are the Messiah, but is then they are cautioned not to tell anyone. Then Jesus shares his Messianic secret – he is not the kind of Messiah they had imagined. He is going to suffer and die and in three days rise. They are confused. Peter says, “no surely not” and Jesus harshly chastises him – “Get behind me, Satan. This is not wisdom. You are not thinking in divine terms, but human.” So just like last week, Jesus’ words are tough. Last week he challenged the Syrophoenician Gentile woman to wait her turn, and then rewarded her for saying, “My daughter deserves your attention.” So now, Jesus is calling his most passionate follower, Peter, “Satan,” for misunderstanding Jesus’ table-turning, boundary-breaking suffering messiah way.

James says, “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.” And we want to tell Jesus to watch his words, and yet, there is a challenging honesty in Jesus that that draws us. His challenge to Peter is inviting more than insulting, but surely it is puzzling. Why should Jesus in this very moment be so harsh with Peter? Then he utters these words of irony that challenge us to this day.

**Mark 8:34-37**

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.  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. 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? (NRS)

The high cost of discipleship is recorded in all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and it’s depth of meaning must have not been lost on those who were being martyred for their faith in Christ when these Gospels were first recorded in writing. One modern-day martyr is Oscer Romero, who was killed at the table, while leading worship. He said, “One must not love oneself so much,

as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us,

and those that fend off danger will lose their lives.”

We struggle to wrap our brains around this life-losing endeavor of discipleship. Especially in the first half of our adult life when we are building a life. How could I possibly be called to lose my life, when I am busy finding it, finding myself, discovering my gifts. And yet, we humans are so inspired by those who sacrifice their all, who give up their lives, for something greater than themselves. Fifty-five years later, we are talking about the sacrifice of four young girls in the 16th Street Baptist church that propelled the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And the words of the Sunday school lesson that day about forgiving your enemies.

Life here is so unpredictable, so fragile. Two LRHS teens (Matt and Chase) on their way to homecoming last had a shockingly different homecoming night. Home to their Creator and unimaginable grief for their family and friends.

Fourteen have died in Hurricane Florence, three of them in my county where I grew up. All the more reason to get on with living with the love of Christ, speaking up for what is right and good and holy, and holding back when necessary to build peace and reconciliation. Silence is a gift to be cherished when no words are the right words.

Sacrificial love is risky. Every step we take toward that love is a daring step, a step that makes us vulnerable…. and very much alive! It can feel like losing, but it is really winning. We are called as disciples of Christ to this way of living. It is in stark contrast to the way being modeled by some of the powerful in our country, who are unabashedly motivated by selfish desires to be “winners.” We cannot heal the world by our verbal bashing of them, for that is to be pulled into their sad and destructive tongue-lashing, but we can speak the truth in love, standing up for those whom they would ridicule. We can be civil and wise. Choosing our own words carefully, praying without ceasing, managing our motives, alleviating our anxieties by trust in God, we will urge one another on in living our lives of daily sacrifice, remembering that the greatest is not the most powerful and provocative, but the one dares bravely to keep working hard at Christ-like love. *Though I may speak with bravest fire and have the gift to all inspire, but have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass and hopeless gain.*