

Proper 19 B 2021  
September 12, 2021 :: James 3:1-12  
Fr. Jim Cook

## “Who do you say that I am?”

“Who do you say that I am?” That was the question Jesus asked of his disciples, in our gospel reading. “Who do you say that I am?” It’s one of the more familiar quotes in the New Testament. However, even though I’m not going to be preaching on the gospel, *per se*, I do want you to keep that question in mind, because we’ll return to it later, after we’ve spent some time with our reading from James.

Okay, first things first: Who exactly *was* James? Well, as far as scholars are able to determine, James was the brother — and by that I mean the sibling — of Jesus. (And, I know, that statement opens up a whole can of worms, theologically, but there it is.) And from very early on, James was one of the major leaders of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem. By most accounts, he was held in high regard, and, judging by “exceptionally well-crafted Greek” that he employed in his letter, he was also intelligent and well-educated.

Now, what we heard this morning, in that small excerpt from James's letter, is a self-contained essay, whose topic is *the power and effects of human speech*.

And this isn't the first time for James to broach this topic. Earlier in his letter, in the first chapter, James advised his readers to "be quick to listen," and "slow to speak." And the reason James returns to this subject, in the third chapter, is probably because he understood the power of the spoken word.

And while he was writing these words, I can easily imagine James recalling other examples of the power of the spoken word, that he had encountered in scripture, and especially in the first Genesis creation story. Because, there, when God *speaks*, good things happen. For example, when God speaks, light comes from darkness. When God speaks, chaos is brought into order. And when God speaks, the human race appears out of a handful of dust.

The spoken word can have *that* kind of power.

And the scriptural claim that humanity was made in the image and likeness of God, is supported by the fact that we humans have been given something no other creature possesses: The capacity to speak with power and effect; the capacity to speak, and change the world around us.

And so, James knows the good that can come from the human tongue; but he has also seen enough to know that *evil* can come from it as well. The spoken word is like a two-edged blade: It can be used like a scalpel, to heal, or like a sword, to harm.

If you ever worked for someone who was quick with words of praise for a job well done, or generous with words of encouragement when the job was difficult, then you know how those words shaped your outlook in *positive* ways.

And if you've ever known a child who's been told repeatedly — by a parent, or sibling, or friend — that they're stupid, or that they're unreliable, or that they'll amount to no good, then you have seen someone who will likely become what those words could only presume.

The human tongue — the words we use — can create a life, or destroy a life. Our words can build people up, or break them down. Our words can encourage or discourage ... and the one, just as easily, and just as quickly, as the other. And so, it really is no surprise that James advises us to be “quick to listen” and “slow to speak.” And the wisdom in those words, should be obvious to everyone.

In preparing for my remarks this morning, I tried to find a good personal story to illustrate all this. But then I realized that, each and every one of us here, has a veritable treasure-trove of examples that make my point.

You see, I’d be willing to wager that every person in this room — no matter your age, your background, your education — that every person in this room can remember at least one condemning word, or one critical sentence, that was spoken *to* you, or *about* you in your hearing, by someone whose opinion you valued.

And I’d be willing to wager as well, that not only can you remember the words themselves, but also that you can even

remember the negative feelings that were evoked by those words. I'll bet that you can still remember the shame you felt, or the sadness you felt, or the pain you felt.

I have such memories, even though, in some cases, more than forty or fifty years have passed.

And didn't those words affect the way we thought about ourselves? And didn't those words shape the way we looked at the world? And didn't those words shape the way we related to other people?

Our words have real power; I mean, not like God's words, which can create something from nothing. But our words can certainly take the people around us — a child, a spouse, a co-worker, a neighbor — and transform them, for better or worse.

And we've always known that this was the case. And we've always know, that the depth of a person's wisdom and compassion, can often be *better* measured by the words which were *not* spoken, rather than by the words which *were* spoken.

And although James' contemporaries were fairly optimistic about the possibility of bringing human speech into line with reason and virtue, James himself was a bit more pessimistic, when he writes:

“For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the [human] tongue” (3:7-8).

This would be a fairly depressing sermon, and one which you might wish to forget, but for the fact that I'm also going to remind you of one important fact: That God always provides us with a way towards redemption and renewal ... and that, through our words as well.

When Peggy and I were new parents, we had an entire collection of parenting books. And a rare bit of wisdom and insight came from one author in particular. She wrote that, when parents are dealing with their children, to remember that one word of criticism must be balanced by ten words of praise. Let me say that

again: One word of criticism must be balanced by ten words of praise.

In other words, the damage done by one word of criticism, is ten times greater than the good that can be done by one word of praise. Therefore, if a word of admonishment is needed — or if a word of criticism escapes your lips — ten words of praise or encouragement are needed to offset any damage done. *Our words are that powerful.* And I hope that, as the grandparents of a three-year-old and a four-month-old, Peggy and I will never forget that.

And so, “Who do you say that I am?” Again, that was the question Jesus posed to his disciples. And he asked because he really did want to know what people thought about him, and whether they understood who he was, and what he was about.

But, you know, we ask that question of each other as well. And we ask it in a variety of ways. But when we do ask it, it seems like there’s more at stake. Because when we ask it, we’re looking for reassurance, and to reinforce the good that we want to believe about ourselves. We ask, because we want a reason to be hopeful and confident about the world, and our place in it.

And the person who asks that question of us, pays us a great compliment, because it shows that they value our opinion. And the person who asks that question of us, gives us a great deal of power over them.

And our answer to that question — a question frequently asked in trust, and hope — can bring either darkness or light, despair or hope, sorrow or joy.

May God grant us all the wisdom, and the courage, and the grace, to answer well.

Amen.