

Mark 8:27-38 ~ James 3:1-12

What Are You Saying?

September 15, 2024 ~ 17th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism

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Introduction to Scripture:

Do you ever wonder how there can be so many polls taken on what seems like a daily basis these days? We have the Gallup Poll, the Marist Poll, the Marquette Law School Poll, Real Clear Politics, FiveThirtyEight, and more: so many polls, so little time. Of course, we know that no poll is predictive. Every single one of them is a measure of a specific window inside a specific space. And we know that no one wins or loses based on the polls. Still, many of us may find ourselves obsessively tracking the political polls of late. Especially now in mid-September 2024. Did you know that polls are not just a modern-day thing? Our first scripture lesson from the Gospel called Mark, written way back in the middle of the first century (CE), begins with Jesus taking a poll. Jesus' little 12-person poll one question poll, as they were walking along. Jesus' began an important and difficult conversation with this one question poll.

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus wants to hear what the word on the street is. The results? It's all over the map; no real consensus. "Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah." And there are always the "undecideds" others say, "maybe one of the prophets." Then Jesus pivots from taking a poll about what *other* people are saying, to asking them, but what do YOU say. Peter, not surprisingly, speaks up first, and what do you know, he gets it right! "You are the Messiah!" Go, Peter, go! In Mark's version of this story, (that is found in all four gospels) Jesus moves directly from Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah" to explaining plainly and clearly what *kind* of Messiah Jesus actually would turn out to be.

And Peter was having none of *that* Messiah. You can see him shaking his head no. Surely the Messiah he signed up for is a winner, not a loser. Hadn't Jesus just been performing stunning miracles and awesome healings? He was drawing larger and larger crowds of people. Peter probably was thinking this is the perfect time to turn up the heat and show those political elites who's who. This was not the time for the Messiah, the king of kings, to suffer, to be bullied, to be rejected and killed on a cross. That is *not* the playbook Peter had in mind at all. That is not a winning strategy. Then came the double rebuke: Peter lashes out at Jesus. And Jesus lashes back, rebuking his A+ pupil, and calling him "Satan". Verbal praise. Verbal smackdown. In so many words he was saying, "Get your mind right, Peter. You don't have a clue. It's about radical decentering. Self-emptying sacrificial Love. I am here to save and heal the least, the last, the lost, those beaten down on the margins." You can see the profound disconnect revealed by this verbal exchange. The chasm between Peter's idea of "Messiah" and who Jesus really was and is.

What about us? When we say, "Jesus is Lord," just as we all professed when we baptized Mason, what are *we* really saying? What kind of Messiah or Lord is Jesus to us? It is tempting to turn him into a child's myth: Jesus as warrior or magician or vending machine, or judge. Think about this for a moment: If Jesus is the revelation of what is going on inside the eternal God, what window into God are we being given here? Jesus is telling the disciples and the crowd:

Here we are in Caesarea Philippi, but my kingdom is nothing like Caesar nor like Philippi, the oppressive and cruel authoritarian leaders of the Roman Empire. In fact, it is the opposite. And because of that, I will be killed on a cross. I will stop at nothing to show you how much I love you and all of God's children. Friends: "Our God is an awesome God," yes, because our God is a decentering, crucified, Christ.

The early church was still struggling to accept a crucified Messiah, even after the empty tomb and Easter. They were struggling when James wrote his letter "to the twelve tribes of the Diaspora." Maybe it was written by James the brother of Jesus, maybe not. According to Josephus, James, Jesus' brother, was stoned to death in 62 CE. Scholars have good arguments for and against this. What we *do* know for sure, whoever actually wrote it, is that this letter is addressing in very concrete terms, the early conflicts and issues facing the church within and all around in the latter part of the first century. Apparently, you don't have to have social media and memes that go viral to have trouble with rumors and lies that distort, disrupt, and even destroy people.

Here in James 3, he begins with a riff on the power of our little member, the tongue. We all have one. Let us listen for the whisper of the Spirit speaking to us through the Word as it is written in James 3:1-12.

Sermon:

One day, as a small child, Thomas Edison came home from school and gave a paper to his mother. He said to her, "Mom, my teacher gave this paper to me and told me only you are allowed to read it. What does it say?" As she read the note out loud to her child, her eyes began to swell with tears. "Your son is a Genius. This school is too small for him and does not have good enough teachers to train him. Please teach him yourself." And so, that is what his mom did until she fell ill and passed away. After Edison's mother died, he famously became one of the greatest inventors of the twentieth century. Many years later, he went through some of her things and found the folded letter that his teacher had written to his mother that day. Edison opened it. The message that was *actually* written on the letter went like this: "Your son is mentally deficient. We cannot let him attend our school anymore. He is expelled". Moved to tears, Edison wrote in his diary: "Thomas A. Edison was a mentally deficient child whose mother turned him into the Genius of the century".ⁱ

Edison's mom had a choice that day in what she would say to her young child, Thomas. And so do we. What we say and don't say depends on what kind of Jesus is truly our Lord. As I taught the children the sign for Jesus, that simple gesture can help remind us, refocus and reset us on the one human being who showed us what God looks like. As the Risen and victorious Christ, still with wounds on his hands and feet. God in whose image we are all created, as James reminds the churches, gave us all tongues, "With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God." (3:9) Yes, that Jesus is the one who draws us together, who calls us to take up the cross in order to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free.

How do we follow *that* Messiah. For us here at FPC we are taking up the cross by doing what we can to dismantle structural racism and discrimination against all who are seen as “less than” if they are seen at all: whether because of their race, their physical or mental disability, their gender identity, or anything else in all creation. Jesus died for them, the same as he died for you and me. It is important for us to say that this is not the Jesus who has been used to create and justify the Doctrine of Discovery, to take land from its native inhabitants, or chattel slavery in the US and its continuing legacies of discrimination, now almost a century and half since the Civil War ended it. Or the Jesus that somehow is associated with “Christian Nationalism.” A movement that appears to be on the rise and is built upon the very opposite agenda of the crucified Christ, the self-emptying, decentering, Messiah. A movement dedicated to pushing white supremacy and their understanding of Christianity above all other religions and races.

This is nothing new. Each age and each community have their “favorite Jesus” which has the potential to be idolatrous and even demonic. John Calvin once famously observed that the human heart is a “factory of idols” – we even make an idol of our preferred Messiah. False messiahs can quickly become the true gods of a faith community. Many Christian churches in Nazi Germany constructed a messiah only for the pure Aryan race. Setting aside the fact that Jesus was himself a person of color and a Jew. Many Christian churches in apartheid South Africa constructed a messiah that endorsed racial segregation and oppression. How do these kinds of idols take hold? Joseph Goebbels, German politician and Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany from 1933-1945, famously said, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.” What do we say and what do we repeat? Regardless of where we identify ourselves along the political spectrum. It is easy to get confused and blown off course. Especially in these days of social media posts and reposts.

How do we “talk the walk”? We promised, Jeremy and Nici promised, and the children promised to share our faith in Christ with baby Mason in both what we do and what we say. We all make these promises because we believe that identity formation is community formation. We learn who and whose we are together week by week. In what we do and in what we say and don’t say. Today we are thinking about our tongues. Surely these tongues of ours have power, as James points out, that punch way above their weight. Power to curse, to bully, to berate; OR to build up, encourage, bring life. Words matter whether they are said in the pulpit, the parking lot, on social media, a tweet, or email. How we speak reveals who our Messiah really is.

We don’t know whether or not Green Bay Packer Quarterback Jordan Love will take the field or not at noon today at Lambeau field; we have every reason to hope the Milwaukee Brewers will bring their brilliant season all the way to the World Series. But we don’t know. We can’t possibly know who will win or lose the presidential election on November 5. But here’s what we do know: Christ has already won the victory over evil and its power in the world: for each of us and all of us. It was the Christ, who went to the cross, died, went to hell, and was raised from the dead to save and heal this broken world, piece by piece through us. Through our actions, yes. But also through our words.

Friends: you have words, and so do I. God has gifted us with tongues to use for good or for ill. Spoken loudly or softly. Posted hastily late one night without much thought. Something you heard second hand. If you feel a little funny inside. Listen to that voice of God within, asking you, "What are you saying?" There is a time to speak, and a time to be silent. It can be hard to know when and what to say sometimes. We can practice that here, together. We actually do that every Sunday in worship. Before we speak, let us listen to our Messiah. Not those other ones, but the One who took that poll one day as he was walking with his disciples. The One who died on the cross to save us all. And let us take up our cross and use our words carefully, wisely and well.

ⁱ <https://revanthgoud8.medium.com/the-power-of-words-bb44836517b>