

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

June 6, 2021

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 3:20-35

Genesis 3:8-15

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

Do you believe that? I mean, as many times as you recited those words as a kid...did you feel like that phrase rang true? Sure...it may have helped you stand up to a bully or to put on a good face. On the outside it may have made you feel a little less vulnerable but on the inside my guess is that your heart was breaking.

Breaking when someone called you names. Breaking when someone put you down. Breaking when you were made to feel like you didn't matter. Words hurt and we all know it. So this morning, I want you to think about the words you have been called. But, I also want you to do something else...I want you to think about the words you have called other people.

Our Gospel this morning is all about the power of words. The power of words to break apart families. The power of words to divide communities. The power of words to discredit, dismiss, and destroy. There are no simple platitudes in our Gospel – no sticks and stones defense. As Jesus is out there healing and taking care of people, a group of folks start to rally against him. He's crazy they say. He's gone out of his mind. Surely Jesus hears these words. You know that moment when you overhear someone saying something about you. That's where we find Jesus. And guess what? When he hears those words, all the bad things people are saying about him, so does his family.

And, instead of having Jesus' back, his own family is drawn in by those hurtful words. They believe them. And in a pivotal moment, his family actually tries to restrain him. How quickly they dismissed him by the power of a few well-directed words. Those words drew them in – the sound bite, the headline, the gossip. I Imagine Jesus' heart breaking.

Words hurt.

This week's Gospel reminds me that our families, our friendships, our communities are built on the power of words. And I have to say, I'm not sure how well we have been doing as a community. The more I have reflected on this, the more convicted I have become that we have lost the simple ability to listen to one another and to talk to one another. When faced with anything that makes us uncomfortable we resort to spewing words of anger and distrust and hate and dismissal. Words that try to sweep the other person under the rug, to silence them so that we don't have to deal patiently or kindly with things that make us uneasy.

What makes hurtful words necessary? Is it that you have different beliefs or values from someone else? Do you disagree on politics? Did someone do something you couldn't understand? What is the dividing line that brings such words and judgments to the surface? What is it that makes us lash out and blame and accuse and cut down?

Notice the dividing line created in our Gospel. The scribes are eager to name call. The judgements and accusations seem to just ooze out of them. Surely, they claim, Jesus is possessed by demons. So uncomfortable were they with Jesus that they grew this narrative for anyone who would listen and that narrative became a poison.

Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, says this about the scribes and their name calling...

"They show themselves devoid of hope and openly contemptuous of God's work. Around them, people are being set free from their demons. People are experiencing wholeness and life. People's dignity is acknowledged....And yet the scribes scoff and denounce all of this as false or dangerous....The extraordinary kind of blasphemy of which Jesus speaks...is an "eternal sin" only because it reveals an entirely calcified mind; such people have seen the works of God up close in Jesus himself and yet repudiated the transformative power of God's grace."

The point is clear. The words, the accusations, occur only after the scribes have closed off their minds to the goodness right in front of them. They have an entirely calcified mind. A mind that has shut itself off to love and compassion and kindness. A mind that no longer seeks to understand. A mind tormented by fear and of what doesn't make sense.

Jesus says, this kind of house, this kind of community, cannot stand. It erodes the very foundation of well-being and trust that is required if we are to live in wholeness together. And, I know, every single one of you has dealt with the calcification of the mind...within yourself or from someone you care about – when you have been on the receiving end of hurtful words.

I think of all of the kids who have come home to tell their parents they are gay or transgender or questioning who they are, only to be turned out and shamed for their sexuality. I think of the women who have stood up to abuse and have callously been told they asked for it. I think of the child being bullied at school and told they aren't smart enough or fast enough or pretty enough. I think of the person struggling with depression who is told just to snap out of it.

For some of you, the words you have heard that are filling your mind, remembering the words that never leave your heart. I know your heart was broken then and I know it still breaks. Sometimes, you probably even thought that sticks and stones would be easier to deal with than those words which you said wouldn't hurt you.

And folks, let me say, there is always a flip side. In order to have such words spoken, someone has to speak them. And...we have all done it. We have all said words we wish we could take back. We can't...but we can do better. Our words don't have to hurt.

So, in those moments of conflict and misunderstanding, in those moments of fear and uncertainty, what other words could be said? What would happen if in times of discomfort, when we feel hurtful words boiling up, we simply took the time to allow God in...before we speak?

This morning I want to encourage you to start letting God in. Let God into your mind so that your thoughts begin with goodwill and faith for one other. Let God into your heart so that your words may flow from a place of gentleness and kindness. Let God into your actions so that what you do speaks just as lovingly as the words you say.

Thanks be to God. Amen.