

Sermon: “Words of Mouth/Meditations of Heart”

Scripture: Psalm 19, James 2, Mark 8

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Date: September 15, 2024

A lot of words this morning to hear, to take in and digest.

There are always a lot of words coming at us, maybe more than ever before in human existence, through our news sources and our social media accounts and the radio and the tv and the computer and the phone and it just keeps pouring out and spilling out of our brains. Like, I’m surprised it took so long for them to realize that when you stop to pump gas you are a captured audience for about 65 seconds. At Speedway where I tend to get my gas its Maria Manunos who greets me with some health tips as I stand there immobilized pumping petrol into the tank of my car. Everybody has ideas, many thoughts for how things should be. Everybody has information to share. Everybody has the latest thing you should do or not do or buy or be concerned about or not.

Have you heard how important sleep is these days and how concerned you should be if you are not getting it? It used to be that we all knew sleep was good and we were all concerned about not getting enough of it but apparently we’ve forgotten that most basic of instincts because there are hours of podcasts and shelves of books and inboxes of articles about how important sleep is. There’s this funny reel from Zach Woods who was an actor on “The Office” where he’s saying with this quiet music behind him - “by the time I end this sentence you should be asleep and if you’re not asleep then you should begin to panic because without sleep your brain

cannot remove toxins and waste that kill your brain ...” and so on and so forth.

There are lot of words out there and a lot of help offered with a lot of words and as exponentially as the words of help and advice have ramped up to a fevered pitch, we as a culture and individuals therein seem to be in need of as much help as ever. Somehow all the words aren't solving all the problems. And as AI gathers up all of our words and can now dole back out to us the greatest of human advice, in the shape of a human face and voice even, I have a strange feeling that still we'll be in need of help.

Cause as words of truth and wisdom and advice ramp up in our information techno age so do words of untruths and half-truths and ignorance to counter them. And while this might be occurring on a new level heretofore unheard of, it's been a perennial problem across the ages of course, this problem with words and information and how they can be used and misused, aligned to good or distorted towards evil, words with truth or falsehood, that stir up love or hatred...

This is why the Psalmist from 3000 years ago had a mantra that we still use today and could use more and more as a mantra for our lives -

“May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

You've maybe heard ministers pray that before sermons but it's a worthy mantra for all of us:

“May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, O God!”

How have you been doing on that score lately? How have the words of your mouth and the meditations of your heart been these days? Would you say they've been acceptable to the Lord?

The debate this past week of course as we expected unleashed a torrent of mouth words and heart meditations that are less than acceptable to the Lord. Is it ok to speak of your hatred or disgust for Trump or for Harris to others or even to harbor that in the meditations of your heart? The number of memes and references that have surfaced making fun of Trump and his people in my social media feed, cause Big Brother knows I tend a little more liberal, is astounding, some of them making me laugh or cringe and many of them making me feel righteous anger in my heart toward him. And I'm sure if you tend more conservative your feeds have a slew of memes, images, references to Harris that are masterfully designed to make you scoff at her and her people, foster a similar disgust and rage so that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts are less than acceptable even to ourselves much less to the Lord.

The writer of the little letter of James knew a thing or two about the danger of our heart meditations and the words of our mouths. The Letter of James is a potent one in our New Testament which you can sit down and read through in one sitting and it's well worth it. It's likely written by a follower or someone influenced by James the Just, Jesus' brother and the first leaders of the first Christian church in Jerusalem. Interestingly enough it has a checkered history of being hugely underappreciated, questioned early on as to whether it should even be in the biblical canon and Martin Luther the Protestant reformer hated the letter which marginalized it even more and that's because of a single verse in it, in James 2:24 - "a person is justified by works not by faith." Cause Luther was all about the Ephesians passage which says the very opposite - "by grace you have been saved through faith and not by works."

I have a suspicion that the letter's unpopularity through history has to do more with the challenge it presents to the Christian to be better and do better, emphasizing the danger of our words, the importance of bridling our tongues and the damage that they can do - "the tongue is a little member but how great a fire it can kindle"! Martin Luther unleashed a lot with his tongue not only the protestant reformation but also some pretty severe anti-semitism and who knows what else.

But Luther aside, the letter of James, is known as the one book of wisdom literature in our New Testament which offers 5 chapters of exhortation for us, the call for us to do better and be better as followers of Jesus and James emphasizes 3 things in particular - 1. to take special care of how we speak and the dangers of the tongue, 2. How we must offer care to those who are in distress and great need, and 3. How we must be careful about what we let into our lives, knowing how what we let into our lives can affect the meditations of our hearts and thus the words that come out of our mouths. That is some serious wisdom for our day.

"Be quick to listen," James says, "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." There's a gem for our day and age.

James tends not to mince words - "If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues, but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless."

And "therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

Enter Jesus Christ, the implanted Word that has the power to save our souls. This turn towards Jesus is an interesting one because it contrasts the danger of human words with the salvific saving Word (capital

W) that is Jesus, the Son of God, the Word of God, made flesh. God speaks and creation comes into existence, says the Psalmist and the writers of Genesis. God speaks God's word of love and Jesus enters the warp and weft of history, says the Gospel of John.

How do we speak Christ and allow Christ to be in our hearts' meditations and the words of our mouths?

One of James the Just's friends was a fellow named Peter, yes, the disciple of Jesus who vacillated between getting it so right and getting it so wrong. And this is where the Gospel of Mark comes in this morning. We witness the power of the word in all its glory and trouble in these verses.

Jesus asks the disciples at this point, midway through the Gospel "who do people say that I am?" And then "who do you say that I am?" To my point last week about Jesus growing into understanding, I like to hear this as Jesus himself trying to figure this out, not that he knows everything and is testing the disciples. But rather that he is in this pensive state of reflecting on his own life, work, ministry and call from God which is infolding and honestly something of a mystery even to him, exactly what's coming next and what his role will be. And so he turns to the disciples as they walk along and asks "have you heard who people say that I am?" And the disciples say "some say you are John the Baptist or Elijah or others say you are a prophet." Jesus listens to this. And then he says - "who do you say that I am?" And there is silence until Peter says four words that change everything - "you are the Messiah".

It could be that Jesus' response is not one of "and you are right Peter, good answer!" But rather reflectively Jesus thinks to himself - "Yes, I think that's right, I am the Messiah" and with that a dawning awareness enters into his silence thinking - "ok, if I'm the Messiah that means this road is

going to get very difficult and very painful. I am going to have to suffer and die. I am that suffering servant that Isaiah speaks of, the one of whom it is said - 'it was our sickness that he bore and our pains that he carried, he was pierced for our offenses and crushed for our wrongdoings...'” And then Jesus turns and shares what he’s thinking with the disciples: “so I must carry on towards Jerusalem where I will be arrested and killed.” And Jesus steals himself for this that he’s realized thanks to the words of Peter.

But Peter, whose words of his mouth also come out so wrong, proclaims with bluster: “no way are we going to let that happen to you! I will never let you be killed!” And I think it’s because Jesus is trying to gather strength in his own heart to face that reality of true Messiah-ship which is why he speaks back so harshly to Peter - “no, stop, get behind me Satan!”

Cause Peter was speaking into something that he knew not the mystery of. If it had been left up to Peter, Jesus would not have gone to the cross. How could Peter have known that the way of the cross - not political power or military prowess or community organizing or economic strategy - no, the humble way of the cross was the way of salvation? Before the mystery of God and God’s purposes in this world, Peter needed to fall silent. Sometimes, like Mary we just need to meditate upon things in our hearts and let the words of our mouths go quiet. Discerning is key. Our words can be aligned with the creative power of God and our words can run counter with equally destructive capacities. We must recognize and choose each day (each moment?) which side we want our words to fall upon. Are the words of my mouth building up or tearing down, healing or hurting, blessing or cursing, empowering or discouraging, just or unjust, condemning or saving, fair or unfair...

I'd like to end with a quote from CS Lewis that speaks into this choice. He says

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says "If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you and if you don't I'll do the other thing." I do not think that's the best way of looking at it. I would rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the free part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole with your innumerable choices all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature, a creature in harmony with God and other creatures and with itself or at war with God, its fellow creatures and itself. Each of us at each moment, you might say, is progressing to the one state or the other.¹

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts lead us towards harmony with God, one another and ourselves in Christ Jesus' name, the one who was the Word of love spoken by God to a world in great need of a word of love. Amen.

¹ From CS Lewis' Mere Christianity