

September 13, 2009
Lectionary 24b
Mark 8:27–38
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In 15 years of ministry I don't think I have ever used a dictionary while preparing a sermon. Sure, I've looked things up on-line, but actually open up the big red Webster's New World Dictionary that sits on my shelf? Never... until yesterday.

I've been thinking about tongues this week and when I looked up the word in the dictionary I found this definition: "a fleshy movable muscular structure attached to the floor of the mouth in most vertebrates. It is an important organ in the ingestion of food, the perception of taste, and in humans, the articulation of speech sounds." The articulation of speech sounds is unique to humans, although many animals have tongues. But for us the tongue is more than a muscle to help move food around, or help us to taste. Our tongue enables us to speak, making it—in many ways—the most powerful muscle our whole body.

In the second reading today, James provides words of wisdom about the use of our tongues. He says that even though it's small, it is mighty; just as a bridle is small, but able to direct the body of a horse; or just like a rudder, which is small, but guides a ship. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. With it we bless the Lord, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing.

Words are our unique gift as human beings, and it's important to recognize their power to build up or destroy. South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson knows this all too well this week, but so do we.... How many of us have used our tongues, our words, to give blessing and praise to the Creator and with that same tongue used words to put down, shame, or curse those who are made in the likeness of God? *Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me?* Whoever made up that phrase was really out of touch with reality. Words can and do hurt and what others say about us defines who we are in the world.

Recently I had an experience with a family member where I said something that I thought was funny and part of the usual bantering that takes place between us. I didn't realize, until after many tears were shed and feelings shared, how much the words I had spoken about her through the years had made her feel about herself. The words I spoke were never really meant to harm, but they managed to help her define who she is and isn't in the world.

The words we use to describe other people or even ourselves, often turn into labels or definitions about who we are: smart, obnoxious, funny, anal, stupid, energetic, obsessive, careless, sissy, creative... What words or phrases do people use to describe you? Are they true? Helpful? Hurtful? Flattering? Limiting?

In the gospel lesson today Jesus asks his disciples to define who he is, "Who do people say that I am?" They answer "John the Baptist" and "Elijah"; and then Jesus asks again, but who do YOU say that I am?" Peter uses a word, a label, with an amazing expectation among the Jewish hearers. He says, "You are the Messiah," which means the anointed one. But that definition doesn't mean much unless it's made clear by whom this person is anointed and for what purpose. Jesus is gathering information that tells him who he is in this world. What's at stake isn't the disciples' rightness or wrongness to the question, as much as it is Jesus' mission.

When Peter defined Jesus as the “anointed one” or “Christ” I wonder if he really knew what he was saying. For 2,000 years of Christian history we have celebrated Peter’s response to Jesus as the right answer. We’ve even called it the first “Confirmation.” But did Peter know what this name “Christ” would mean? Did he know how it would really define Jesus’ mission in the world? That it would involve suffering and persecution and even death? I doubt it. And we learn later in the reading that as Jesus describes his mission as the anointed one, Peter tries to deny the mission and correct Jesus. Jesus redefines the definition of “anointed one.” Instead of military leader or king as the people had come to expect, he informs the disciple of a new way of being, a reformed image of the anointed, and a reclaimed image of God in the world. Jesus says, “Any who want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.”

Jesus invites us into a radical way of life and a new identity in him. No more are we defined by the worldly measures of accomplishment, leadership, or pressure to be better than the other. Instead we are invited into a mission of self denial and service. When you ask yourself or others, “Who am I? What is my purpose? Who am I called to be?” forget the labels and negative descriptions you receive from family, friends and co-workers and remember that you are first and foremost anointed as Child of God. In Holy Baptism we are given the label, the title “Child of God.” The pastor, on behalf of the whole church, anoints the child with oil and says, “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

But when Ryan and Lucy receive their new titles this morning as water and word meet them at the font, the words being spoken and promises made are not just for them, they are for all of us as a community of faith. Ryan and Lucy join a journey we are already on, and we welcome them into learning and service with us. For they are not only “child of God,” they are also members of something bigger: “Body of Christ.” Together, we are called to follow this one who is impossible to define, whose name is so holy his chosen people can only breathe it...

The words and actions of this Christ, this rabbi and messiah, call us to follow. Today is rally day, but we do more than kick-off a school year. We remember. We remember an identity that really counts, we remember promises made, and perhaps we make new ones—to use our words carefully, to learn all that we can about this God and God’s people, and to serve neighbor and world.