

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Not much of the book of James has made it into our three year lectionary cycle. In all three years, there are only 6 readings from James, one occurring in the season of Advent and 5 times in this year B of the three year cycle. Compared to the book of Romans or Corinthians, James has a poor showing. Perhaps that has to do with the fact that our founder, Martin Luther, didn't like the book. Luther didn't like the book, calling it an epistle of straw. He thought it contradicted his ideas about justification, not to mention the fact that Jesus is never mentioned in it.

Be that as it may, we have the book before us today and oddly enough, on the very Sunday when we are installing our church council and our Sunday school coordinators. The passage for today begins with, "Not many of you should become teachers...."

Thank you for that, it's not as if recruiting teachers wasn't hard enough, we have the word from Scripture today saying that not many should aspire to the job. At first glance, it seems odd advice, except when you think about what James is saying, which is, as a small rudder can steer a great ship, and as a small piece of metal can make as large a creature as a horse obey the slightest tension applied by its rider, so teachers have the ability to guide lives, if not destinies, by the words their tongues speak. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire.

Words are important, and they have great power. Recall the first time you said, "I love you," to someone outside your parents or your immediate family. Recall the first time you heard them back, or how you felt, when they weren't returned. Words have power.

In the gospel reading for today, we have Jesus asking his disciples two questions. He begins by asking them, "Who do people say that I am?" He asks them to tell him what they have heard about him in the towns and villages they've visited.

I was reading one of those catalogs that come in the mail every other day, it was from one of those companies that make cool, expensive stuff that no one needs, and that few can afford but it was fun reading about the stuff anyway. There was a

mirror in there that they advertised, that was a mirror that had some kind of special optics in it that reflected your image back to you, but not the way a regular mirror does, instead, it reflected the image back to you so that you would see yourself as others see you. So, for instance, if I looked in the mirror, the mole that is on the left hand side of my face, that I have always seen as being on the right hand side of my face as I looked in the mirror, in this mirror would appear in its regular place, as it does when you look at me. I thought that was strange. The catalog said that looking at yourself the way others see you is a revelatory experience that would change your life. I'm not so sure, I think the only revelation I would glean would be that my wallet was suddenly \$1495 lighter. And if I did that, when Debby found out, my life would be changed indeed.

Anyway, Jesus wanted to know how others saw him, what others thought of him, what they were saying about who they thought he was. Perhaps he wanted to know if the message he was trying to portray was the message they were appropriating, he wanted to take their temperature, he wanted to look in the mirror and see himself as they saw him.

So they answered him, "Some say Elijah, others, John the Baptist, others say one of the other great prophets." Fair enough. Those who saw him, who heard what he had to say, likened him to one of the great prophets from their history.

But then he goes one and asks, "But who do YOU say that I am?"

It's one thing to ask someone what they've heard about you. It's another thing to put it in first person. So, when I drive home from church today, I'll turn to Debby and ask her, "So, did you hear anyone say anything about my sermon today?" "No, not particularly," she'll say, or she'll say, "It seemed like they were listening. The place was quiet, I didn't hear a lot of coughing and no one around was fidgeting too much."

But then, to turn to her and say, "But what did YOU think?"

You know there are all sorts of ways you can dodge a question, aren't there? So I ask you what you thought of the Chicken Wing Festival last week and even though the wings were outrageously priced and usually cold and greasy and some young child spilled Kool-Aid all over your new dress, you answer, "There was a nice crowd there wasn't there? Or, it was a good thing it didn't rain or I saw Byron Brown there.

So Jesus turns to the disciples and says, "But...who do YOU say that I am?"

And Peter speaks up first. “You are the Messiah.”

It’s one thing to say, “This is what I’ve heard,” or “Some are calling you a prophet, some say they liken you to John the Baptist, perhaps even Elijah,” but it’s an entirely different thing to say, “But for me, you’re not just a prophet, for me, you’re not even a great prophet, for me, you are the one Israel has been waiting for, for me, you are the one the prophets foretold, for me, you are the promised Son of David who has come to rescue your people.” It’s not just what I heard, it’s what I believe.

It’s not just what I’ve heard, it’s what I believe. And belief is what drives us, belief is what makes it all real for us, belief is what makes the difference between a whole hearted effort and a half-----baked one, belief is what makes one succeed where others fail, belief is what holds a plan or a vision together when everything else tries to break it apart and tear it asunder.

I believe you are the Messiah and that said, my life is forever changed, because if you are the Messiah, then my life is no longer my own, it is yours...if you are the Messiah, then I have to live my life in a different way... if you are the Messiah, then the goal of my life is to participate in bringing about the kingdom you proclaim.

Words have power and Peter’s words changed everything, which is why, when just a few sentences later, when Jesus speaks of his suffering and death Peter blurts out, “God forbid,” because he just aligned himself, his whole being, his whole existence on who Jesus is for him, and to hear Jesus talk about dying, well, that didn’t fit into Peter’s vision for what the Messiah came to do, that didn’t fit Peter’s vision for the kingdom. Which is why Jesus replied, ‘Get behind me, Satan.’ Because **your** vision for the kingdom is not where we’re going to go. Satan, by definition,` is the one who “throws obstacles in our way,” hoping to get us to go down any path other than the one God sets before us, and Peter’s vision of who Jesus was, put him on a different path than the one God had in store for His Son. That path led to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to death. It was the path of obedience to the plan God had in store for all of us, which includes the resurrection. What it means to be the Messiah, is to be the one who saves, where salvation consists in that radical mix of life and death, of joy and sorrow, of holding on and letting go, of letting go of that which seems most precious in order to receive an even greater and more precious gift.

The only example I can think of that even comes close to explaining this is when a pregnant woman comes to that point in her pregnancy when the child comes to be born. All she has, all she is, all she has done to hold and nurture and provide and sustain this new life, which has grown in her and which has come from deep inside her and is a part of her like nothing else in the world is, all this has to end and the mother has to release the child in order for it to have life and have it in its abundance. This letting go is accompanied by great pain, which precedes a great joy.

It was a lesson Peter had to learn, and come to accept about Jesus too. What would it profit the mother to hold on to the child and lose the life? And Jesus said to Peter, “What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?”

Jesus had a larger viewer of what that life entailed, a view that wasn't bound by time and space, by what we see and know, what we can feel and sense.

I was moved again this past week by the remembrances of September 11<sup>th</sup> and I come to the conclusion, again, yet again, that the only way, the only way, any of us, especially those who lost loved ones in those great tragedies, could ever hope to find any peace at all, is if we come to accept that larger view of life that Jesus' death and resurrection opened up to us, it's what sustains me in my living and which will comfort me and you, in our dying.

Amen.