

17th Pentecost
September 16, 2018
Church of the Advent

Hard Teaching

To begin, I am very happy to see you here today, and what better place to be than church on this particular morning—standing on a bridge between our grateful survival of what has already passed, and our anxiety about what is yet to come for our relatives, our friends, and our East Carolina neighbors who have been, and will yet be, displaced and suffering by storm, wind, and way too much water. Church offers us a place to come together—an escape out of hunkered-down confinement, a respite from worrying about ourselves to say our prayers, and reflect on how to pay our own blessings forward to those who do not feel so blessed this morning. And it can't hurt to replace the endless addicting loops of the Weather Channel pictures and descriptions of destruction, with the sights and sounds of familiar worship, and—if only for an hour. I had made up my mind this morning not to repeat any of those loops, and to avoid all of those metaphors about the storms of life that everyone takes a turn weathering now and again, thinking *enough already!* And then I sat with our readings for today, and found that today—of all days—we are being *mocked* by Wisdom.

Because I have called and you refused,
 have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
 and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
 I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a storm,
 and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.

Seriously? Today? We get the Book of Proverbs telling us that Wisdom cries out with the prophesy of calamity, *like a storm*? Metaphors are so much more powerful when they are images in our imagination—less so when for so many around us that imagination has become disastrous reality, and the last thing needed is a word of scriptural reproof. For even those of us who have so far escaped the worst, have we not suffered enough in *anxiety alone* to get a pass on Wisdom's *reproof* today?

James, the author of our Epistle today, would argue *not so much*. He takes us back into the wider world—outside our bubble of obsession with potential calamity for ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors, and yes, our stuff, to bring us a message about—of all things—our tongues. Instrument of taste, swallowing and speech—highly sensitive and surprisingly powerful, James calls the tongue an untamed, restless evil, full of fire and poison. He says:

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Though this sounds like it could have been written for our present cultural and political climate, I ask what in the world could James have been talking about, so long ago and far away, in a land before time as we know it, before media in all of its contemporary possibilities and ramifications—before communications was a necessary component of any large human enterprise as well as a college major? Why liken the tongue to the rudder of a great ship, or the bit in a horse's mouth, and then disparage its use?

What James was saying to his audience—congregations in the early church—was that words *matter*, more than we often realize or admit. We are often unaware of the power we hold in the gift of speech, and are not always careful with our words. Those admonitions we grew up with—*hold your tongue, bite your tongue, keep a civil tongue*—are all familiar versions of the same thing—attempts to discourage speaking in ways that can harm—intentionally or unintentionally. I am not talking about political correctness—which has become a cynical meme for a claim that if someone is offended by our speech then it is *their* problem. His message is rather that we Christians be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; that as we hear the Word, we become *doers* of the Word, without judging others; that our faith without works is empty; that we should walk the walk, not just talk the talk. As James says, we cannot be *a spring that brings forth water both brackish and fresh*.

Easier said than done, right? We crave validation, and sometimes that means using our evil tongue to make our case against another. We are sure that our causes are righteous—so we use our fiery tongues to disparage all who might see them otherwise. We are quick to speak blame when we do not feel not well served by others, and quick to deflect it when we have not

served others well. And when we have been cooped up and anxious and inconvenienced beyond all reason—by a stupid hurricane, no less—we feel we surely deserve to be cranky when our expectations for wanting everything set right and perfect and within our control are just not happening fast enough. And if anyone can't abide an uncivil tongue, then they can just get over it. It is just about as hard to get what Jesus meant when he said:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

So yes, after a hard week, we get a round of hard teachings. It would have been lovely today to hear only about our God so full of compassion and grace and forgiveness and patience and healing, filling us with such gratitude that we cannot help but to love everyone—at least in a sentimental way. But if our story with our loving God and the saving love of his Son Jesus Christ were that simple, it would have ended at the manger. The truth is that these teachings *are* hard, but they do *not* ask more of us than Jesus was willing to ask of himself when he told the disciples:

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Of course Jesus was met with rebuke—from Peter—the one he chose to lead the rest. Peter did not care for this hard teaching, and yet he heard: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.* Or in other words, this is *not* going to be easy.

So how do *we* do this hard thing—taking up our cross and following Jesus? How do we follow James to *bless the Lord our Father, and refrain from cursing those made in his image and likeness?* How do we become doers of the Word, ready to lose our lives for the sake of the gospel. How do we become springs of fresh water?

We begin with gratitude, refusing to forget that we have just been spared so much heartache and loss that our brothers and sisters just down the road and the river are suffering—and will be suffering for weeks and months to come. Then we allow ourselves to be moved to offer to those who will have lost almost everything as much as we can to contribute to their healing and wholeness. And we hold our tongues—always so quick to lay blame somewhere—

anywhere—when disaster is at our door. Shame and blame are not helpful. Rather, kindness is helpful. Generosity is helpful. Sacrificial love is helpful. Blessed beyond measure by so much we take for granted: homes with a solid roof, bathrooms not being shared with 500 people, a bed to sleep in, electricity and air conditioning, refrigerators with food in them, this church, these people, this life—we can become doers of the Word by paying those blessings forward, however, whenever, and to whomever we can. And we hold our tongues as best we can.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Hard teachings for a hard week full of calamity and blessing. In gratitude for our many blessings may we stay strong in the Word, for others will need our strength in days to come. **Amen**