

## CROSS TALK AND OTHER TALK

Pentecost 16 Year B

Prov. 1:20-33; Ps. 19; Jas. 3:1-12; Mk. 8:27-38

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Who can tell me what the most powerful weapon on this earth is? Nuclear warheads? A well trained army? Your mother-in-law's cooking. No! None of these things. It's the tongue. The tongue, if it's not watched very carefully, can get you into quite a lot of trouble, can't it? It can destroy individual lives and whole nations. Who has ever gotten into trouble because of the way they've used their tongue? (pause) Who has *never* gotten into trouble because of the way they've used their tongue? (pause) That's what I thought.

One of the golden rules of life is: "Don't forget to engage your brain before putting your mouth into gear." But isn't it true that often we pour forth voluminous words, before we think it through. Recently I came upon this quote which may help some: "Think twice before you speak, and then you may be able to say something more insulting than if you spoke right out at once."<sup>1</sup> But perhaps that's not where we want to go with this.

The author, Marvin Phillips, in his humorous and insightful book, *Never Lick a Moving Blender*, (Love that title, don't you? Think about it.) offers us another old saying: "He that talketh by the yard but thinketh by the inch, should be kicketh by the foot."<sup>2</sup> And that probably just about sums it up, I think.

The following story, I believe, proves the point:

An old rich dying man said to his young wife, "When I die, I want you to get married again. You're young and beautiful and you have your whole life ahead of you."

"Nonsense!" she said.

"And I want you to give your next husband all my clothes. I want him to look good when he takes you out."

"Please don't talk that way," she said. "It's impossible."

"What's impossible about it?"

"You're a thirty-eight regular, and he's at least a forty-four long."

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<sup>1</sup> Evan Esar (1899 - 1995), *Esar's Comic Dictionary*

<sup>2</sup> Marvin Phillips, *Never Lick a Moving Blender*, (West Monroe: Howard Publishing Co. Inc. 1996) 69

I think the correct term is: Oops.

Many of us suffer from the perennial foot-in-mouth disease. But making occasional mistakes with our words is not the real problem for us—they might cause us some embarrassment but on the whole they're usually fairly harmless.

As Christians, however, we have to be very careful how we use our tongue. As James says in the epistle reading for today, "The tongue is a fire." That is, the tongue, if used inappropriately, can send out sparks that sets whole forests ablaze. Because of the way the tongue is often misused, even though it's just a small flap of skin between your gums, it can cause your whole body to be unclean.

Why? Not because of any inherent fault of the tongue, but because one's misuse of the tongue is a symptom of something much deeper and much darker within. For out of the heart, the Scriptures tell us, so the mouth speaks. If the heart is unclean, then all of you is unclean—because it merely reflects on the outside what is on the inside.

There are two ways to use your tongue—apart from keeping your mouth closed of course—and sometimes that's the best option. You can use it in a negative way or you can use it in a positive way. With our tongues we have the power to destroy and the power to build up—the power to delay and the power to commit—the power to deny Christ and the power to proclaim him as Messiah.

We are all, no doubt, familiar with the destructive nature of the tongue. All of us, I would hazard to say, have been at the receiving end of the tongue's destructive nature and more than likely, been on the giving end of it. From a careless word that hurts unnecessarily, to words of deceit and anger that threaten to undermine a person or persons totally—words that destroy reputations and lives. The tongue, however, can also be used to build up—a word of encouragement here, a quiet word of assistance there or a public word of support for someone who needs it.

With the tongue we can pull away from what God wants of us—"God couldn't be talking to me." "Let me go and bury my father first." Even the simple words "No" or "Not yet" can be a way of stalling our commitment to God.

But we can also use the tongue to commit ourselves in Christ's service. "Here am I, Lord, send me," from Isaiah. "May it be unto me as you have said," from the young Mary, the mother of Jesus. "Thy will be done," from Jesus himself just before his trial and crucifixion.

With the tongue we can so easily deny the Christ whom we profess to follow. Remember Peter's words, "I never knew him"? When we're hurting, when we're angry, when we don't get our own way, when we purposely rebel against God in all manner of ways, we are, in effect, denying Christ—we deny his saving work on the cross—we contradict that which we profess to be true in our own lives—and we show ourselves to be living a lie.

But with the tongue we can also confess positive things. We can profess Jesus as, not only *the* Messiah but as *our* Messiah—*our* Christ—the one to whom *we* look for all our sustenance and guidance throughout life. The one who leads us beside still waters and lush green fields—the one who walks beside us in the pleasant times and carries us when the going gets tough.

But as both James in his letter and Jesus in the gospel passage for today, state, words alone are not enough. Mere profession of faith is not enough. What is required is action. If we are to be men, women and children of active Christian faith and service, then we have to do something about what we say. We have to live out our confession. We may profess Christ and him crucified, to borrow Paul's term, but if our actions contradict that profession, then the truth is not in us—we deceive only ourselves.

Sometimes the words that we speak, serve only to try to hide who we really are. Sometimes, however, they reveal only too well, who we really are. Sometimes that's good—sometimes that's not so good. Words that are not backed up by active commitment—with the emphasis on *active*—are empty and hollow.

Today in the gospel reading, Jesus asks Peter what others say about him. "What's the gossip, Peter? What are people saying about me behind my back? Who do they think I am?"

"Well," says Peter, "some say that you're John the Baptist. Others say that you're Elijah or maybe one of the other prophets."

“Ah, Peter... Peter, who do *you* say that I am?”

“You are the Messiah—the one who has come to deliver us from oppression—the one who has come to redeem us back to God.”

“O Peter, how right you are. But you do not yet understand what that means.”

“To be the Messiah does not mean to raise up an army to conquer the Romans and bring about a peaceful Jewish nation under God—it means to suffer and die—and anyone who wants to follow me, must be prepared to do the same. If you want to follow me, words are not enough. They are the right words, Peter, they are the right words, but they are not enough. You must deny yourself, you must take up your cross and you must follow me.” When Jesus took up *his* cross, he took it up to Golgotha—and died. What will it mean for you?

Christian discipleship is not about simply spruiking it out of your mouth—saying the right words—engaging the tongue in confession but not the body in action. It’s about living life in all it’s pain, disappointment, frustration, and maybe sometimes glory—it’s about knowing Christ rather than just knowing about him. It’s about actually being, in your whole self, who you say you are, with your tongue.

As James reminds us, the tongue is a fire and from it sparks can fly out and destroy. Peter, however, in the gospel reading reminds us that the tongue can also be used to confess Christ as Lord and Saviour. How are you going to use your tongue this week? Will you deny Christ by speaking words that tear down and destroy—or will you, in both your words and action, confess Christ as Lord and Saviour and so bring glory to God?

Today, I want to encourage you to speak “cross” words. No, not *cross* as in angry, but “cross” as in the cross of Christ—words that are spoken—and acted out—in love—words that focus on others—words that encourage and build up—words that deny self—words that speak the truth—words that show up who you *really* are as a follower of Christ—words that reflect the taking up of your own cross—words (and actions) that loudly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To him be all glory honour, majesty and praise. Amen.