

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The Sixteen Sunday after Pentecost: September 12, 2021

“Sticks and Stones”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning, everyone. Today I would like to focus on our Epistle reading from James. I would also like to point out that I, along with most of you, are “teachers” in many aspects. Whether you teach in a formal setting, are raising children or grandchildren, or are helping another learn something, well, that means you also fall under the category of teacher.

A teacher has the responsibility of being honest with those they are teaching. And as we have learned over the years, positive reinforcement over the long haul works better and improves the memories of something learned, rather than harsh words and actions.

Do any of you remember the sing/song of grammar school, “**Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.**”

We often recited this to ourselves or others when we didn’t want others to know how hurtful their words truly were. However, the belief that physical injury is more painful than psychological or emotional injury has been proven to not necessarily be true. Scientific studies actually show that positive and negative words not only affect us on a *deep psychological level*, but they have a significant impact on the outcome of our lives.

So before the study of neuroscience, Jesus and his disciples understood this. From the previous scriptures where Jesus tells us that uncleanness comes not from eating un-kosher foods, but rather from what we talk about, to James telling us that

our tongue needs to be bridled, we can see that words affect not only our outside world, but also our inner self and our soul.

In their neuroscience experiment, “Do Words Hurt?”, Maria Richter and collaborating scientists monitored subjects’ brain responses to auditory and imagined negative words. During this process, their study proved that negative words release stress and anxiety-inducing hormones in their subjects.

Additionally, a study found increased levels of anxiety in children associated with higher rates of negative self-talk. “These results suggest negative self-talk plays a role in the generation or *maintenance* of anxiety in normal children.” This can extend into our adulthood. Ultimately, negative words, whether spoken, heard, or thought, not only cause situational stress, but also contribute to **long-term anxiety**.

And although I just presented you with a lot of scientific speak, this is exactly the point of James’ message. Your tongue and ears can either lift you up and set you free, or start a fire that takes a lifetime to put out.

As a chaplain, I cannot tell you how many times I’ve heard stories of people who have had preachers scare them as young people. Others have felt condemned by how the scriptures have been preached, as they felt their own personal lifestyles judged. I have seen downright good-meaning Christians scar a person through the use of their words, all while trying to proclaim the Gospel.

Notice James’s axiom: the mature person is able to “bridle” his tongue. The person who can do this is master of the whole body (note that some scholars take “body” here to possibly refer to the body of the church). As James is clear to point out, the control of the tongue has both negative and positive aspects. It involves the ability to restrain the tongue in silence. But it also means being able to control it in gracious speech when that is what is required.

And what about self talk? Do you criticize yourself harshly? Are you throwing those sticks and stone like words at yourself? This is also not fruitful and actually not very Christian, as God so loved the world, and Jesus loved us just as we are, even suffering to save us. It is actually disrespectful to disrespect yourself - for you are a child of God.

There is a reason the Gospel is called Good News, and it is not because it condemns you, but because it sets you free. The tongue carries into the world the breath that issues from the heart. Your thoughts become words and your words become action, your actions become habits, which then become ways of being.

Your words should not be empty, but have meaning. Dr. Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist at Thomas Jefferson University, and Mark Robert Waldman, a communications expert, state “*a single word* has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress.” According to these two experts in their field, exercising positive thoughts can quite literally change one’s reality.

Jesus asks us today to explain who he is, and although the correct word in our Gospel is Messiah, that too needs more of an explanation. The word Messiah itself holds such power that Jesus called them to stay silent in this regard. We are called to live as Jesus would want us to, in peace and in harmony. But even James understands we are only human and we consistently and constantly make mistakes, and the word Messiah holds many things. We need to be clear of what that means to us, before we can share it with others.

Jesus and the disciples knew this. They knew that proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah was using powerful words and those words could get them killed. Yet within the very praise of Jesus, the very words we proclaim everyday in prayer, we as

followers of Jesus will find the strength to endure whatever comes our way. We let His words form our reality. Jesus' words have always been, "peace be with you."

And last but not least, I have to mention the power of silence. Being silent allows us to channel our energies. It gives us the clarity we need to calmly face challenges and uncertainty. Many of us have forgotten or even fear quiet. We live in a world full of noise and chatter. A world wherein our daily routines are inundated with distractions and responsibilities.

The half- hour of silence I practice each morning, and encourage you to practice as well, can be a time for collecting our thoughts, training our minds, and deciding how we want to enter into the day. A time when we can bridle the tongue and reset ourselves. A time when we take a breath rather than speaking a word.

Proclaiming the Gospel, being a Christian, participating in teaching others, as the flawed human beings we are; takes thought, timing and practice. To have silence to collect our thoughts helps us to use our words wisely, honestly and humanely.

Everyone is bearing a cross of their own, part of our journey on this earth is, when possible, to help another along the way, just as we would want them to be there for us. Let us approach others and ourselves with compassionate words and not "sticks and stones."

"Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." Implicit in this saying of St. Francis is the understanding that often the most powerful sermons are unspoken. When we have integrity and live consistently by our standards, people notice. When we radiate joy and happiness, they notice even more than words can say. Amen