



Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 12, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene Kristin Keyes, Lay Preacher

[Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38](#)

Opening Ourselves to God's Deep and Abiding Love Will Transform Us

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my salvation. Amen.

Good Morning! For those of you who may not know me, I'm Kristin Keyes, Sr. Warden for St. Luke's.

I find myself with many sobering thoughts this weekend. We commemorate the 20th anniversary of the terror attack on our nation on September 11th, 2001, when thousands of people lost their lives. I imagine most of us can remember exactly where we were as the horrors of that day unfolded before us. And we continue to live in a world broken by wars, especially in Afghanistan, destructive storms, earthquakes, civil unrest, and more. I find myself wishing we could return to September 12, 2001, and the days following this attack. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry wrote this past week: "We were praying, grieving, and also working together. Because in that moment, however fleeting it was, we knew with immediacy and vulnerability that we need God, and we need each other."

And then we have today's readings. These are some unsettling scriptures. Nothing is sugarcoated and these words lay out alarming consequences for not heeding God's call.

In Proverbs, Wisdom laughs at our calamity, mocks us when panic strikes, refuses to answer, or be found simply because we have not chosen the fear of the Lord. The contrast between not listening to Wisdom and heeding her is drawn sharply in these verses. Life or death -- security or disaster.

James admonishes us for using our mouths for both blessings and curses – calling our tongues a restless evil, full of deadly poison. No one can tame the tongue, he declares.

James even goes so far as to caution that not many of us should become teachers because those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. Certainly, not the confidence builder I would hope for when making my preaching debut.

And then we get into the most verbally abusive passage in Mark. Three times Jesus or Peter tells the other to basically "SHUT UP." The text uses the Greek verb *epitimaō*, which is the same word used to stifle demons and calm a raging gale. We are told that if we want to become Jesus' followers, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. The passage ends with Jesus saying that those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them, the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Did Jesus really mean this? And where is God's grace in all of this?

It is there even in these passages. Maybe not overtly, but as with most of scripture, the underlying message is God's love is abiding and deep. If we allow God to love us, we will be transformed.

Proverbs offers grace in our last verse: "But those who listen to me will be secure, and will live at ease, without dread of disaster." Wisdom takes on the role of a prophet in these passages, and much like the other prophets of the Old Testament, the consequences of not following the Lord are severe. But following divine instruction can transform us.

Our Psalm for today, [10:30: which we didn't actually read,] offers wonderful divine encouragement; how a life lived in God's love can transform us:

- 7 The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- 8 The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the Lord is clean and endures forever;
the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold, more than much fine gold,
sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb.
- 11 By them also is your servant enlightened, and in keeping them there is great reward.

Last week, the passage from James was about actions. How we act shows what we actually believe more than words ever can. This week, James is admonishing us for the words we choose to speak, claiming that no one can tame the tongue – an implicit call to do the very thing said to be impossible.

Words are powerful – they can be uplifting, creating a sense of awe, calm, and wonder. They can be degrading, creating a sense of shame, unworthiness, and low self-esteem. James is reminding us that God is calling us to choose and use our words wisely. For what we say to one another can have immense impact, both positive and negative. We are called to love one another, and our words play a large part in that.

And in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is continuing his travels this time in the far northern reaches of what is Israel today, near the borders of Syria and Lebanon. He's checking in with his disciples, asking, "Who do people say I am?" The disciples responded saying people thought perhaps John the Baptist, maybe Elijah, or another of the prophets. Then Jesus asks, "Who do You say I am?" Peter answers: "You are the Messiah." Jesus' response to Peter and the disciples is stern: Do not tell anyone about me!

Jesus then goes on to speak quite plainly about how he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and then after three days rise again. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Another stern response.

When you look at Peter's response to Jesus' initial question, "Who do you say I am?," it isn't very rational given the meaning of Messiah in Hebrew or Christ in Greek. Both are associated

with the Jewish tradition of an announced king, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors and restore Israel's independence and glory. Nothing that Jesus had done so far in his ministry has given any claims to royalty or political ambitions.

So, Peter's response to Jesus' description of what is to come is accusatory and probably angry. Something like: "Jesus, this is NOT what a messiah is supposed to be or do! The Messiah is supposed to conquer the Romans, not get killed by them. What good is a dead messiah?"

Jesus turns and speaks loudly for all his disciples to hear another stern rebuke directed to Peter. "Get behind me Satan! You are setting your mind NOT on divine things, but on human things!"

Then Jesus calls his disciples and the crowd around him and tells them 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.

The metaphor of taking up your cross would be quite poignant for these 1st century people under Roman rule. Crucifixion was utter degradation and excruciating torture used by the Romans to terrorize those under their subjection. The condemned were often required to carry the crossbeam on which they were about to be hung. No wonder Peter responded so fiercely after Jesus described how he was to be killed.

Let's take a close look at what it means to take up your cross. Elizabeth Johnson, a professor at Lutheran Institute of Theology wrote this in her commentary on today's scripture: "When Jesus commands us to take up our cross, he isn't talking about the day-to-day suffering that is simply part of life in a broken world. He is talking about being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences may be."

I believe we are blessed to live in a country where we are not generally persecuted for our beliefs, where we see comparatively little repercussions for being a follower of Christ. Yet we are still commanded to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Johnson continues, "We are called to put Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort and security. We are called to lose our lives by willingly giving it to others -- our time, resources, gifts, energy, all of which can be used to help others experience God's love made known to us through Jesus Christ."

Just how do we do this? It's incredibly difficult if we don't first allow God to transform us. If we open ourselves to God's deep and abiding love, we will be transformed. We are invited to participate; to take action; to take that first step of opening ourselves to God. It's not hard, right? We simply allow God to love us, and we will be transformed.

As Paul tells us in Philippians: “It is God, who for God’s own loving purpose, puts both the will and the action into you. (Philippians 2:13).

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, and one of my favorite writers on all things spiritual puts it this way:

“It is not mere rule-following behavior; rather, it is our actual identity in God that is radically changing us. Jesus offered the world full and final participation in his own very holistic teaching. This allowed Jesus to speak of true union at all levels: with ourselves, with neighbors, with outsiders, with enemies, with nature, and—through all of these— with the Divine. The net and sweep of participation was total. What else could truly “good news” be?”

If we open ourselves to God’s deep and abiding love, we will be transformed. Amen.