

Proper 19, Year B
September 15, 2024

We ask in this morning's collect that "the Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts." As we listen to our other readings, the collect might better have asked that God's Holy Spirit direct and rule our words. And perhaps by implication, that is what is being said. Our readings seem to be focused on speaking: Isaiah says that God has given him the tongue of a teacher, so that he might give sustenance to one who is weary with just a word; the psalmist loves God, because God has heard the prayers he has uttered; James cautions that very few of us might want to become teachers, because people listen to what teachers say and judge them harshly. And Jesus says, who do people say that I am?

What have we learned here? That spoken words will be heard, that hearing is most effective when combined with listening, that speaking, hearing and listening are all intertwined and should be preceded by thought. The disconnect lies so often with the heart: where is the heart in all of this speaking and listening exchange? As the saying goes, if I had a nickel for every time I've said something I wish I hadn't – to say nothing of the times I wish I had spoken up for something or someone - I'd be a wealthy woman. We need to think before we speak and if we can push our egos out of the way and make room for the Holy Spirit to direct and rule our hearts, the world may have a chance. The heart/mind connection seems to some of us a dangerous thing: don't let your heart get in the way of your decision; you need to think with your mind, not your heart, we hear folks say. But for centuries, cultures other than western, post-modern society assumed the heart/mind bond was a given. A search on Google reminds us "it was the ancient Egyptians who believed the heart was the source of a person's intellect, character, emotions, and memory. And in Greek philosophy, Aristotle believed the heart was responsible for controlling thought, sensation, and body movement. The ancient Chinese believed the heart was the seat of intelligence and mind, and that the heart ruled the body." In our culture and thought today, we have succeeded in surgically removing the heart from the mind and vice versa. Our default all too often is to speak without considering what the impact might be on the person or persons to whom we are speaking. Standing at a pulpit on a Sunday morning, for example, is a daunting task: I can be sure something I say

will hurt or confuse at least one listener. But if love rules our thinking – love for creation, love for neighbor, love for Jesus Christ who teaches us how to love – think of the civilizations, cultures, friends, strangers-not-yet-friends, creatures, and natural resources we might not have destroyed. Indeed, in his letter this morning, James dramatically reminds us of how dangerous the spoken word can be:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue-- a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

With it we bless the Lord, while at the same time, cursing those not like ourselves also made in the image of God.

On the other hand, Isaiah reminds us that with one word, we can offer hope, comfort, and support to someone in need, but we must listen for God who alone *can* tame the tongue.

And where do we go with our tamed tongue? “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Who do *we* say Jesus is? In our Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we are asked “what do we mean when we say Jesus is the only Son of God;” the answer is “we mean that Jesus is the only perfect image of God and shows us the nature of God.” What is the nature of God? Isaiah says:

I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

Again, from the Catechism, “what is the nature of God revealed in Jesus?” The nature of God is love: love, humility, vulnerability and willingness to die for another. Jay O’Hara, a Quaker climate activist, writes:

Jesus manifested the paradoxical power of vulnerability.
The paradox is that our vulnerability is our strength.
In order to have life, we must lose it.
In order to be a leader, we must be a servant.
When we turn the other cheek,
we upend a power structure based on domination and fear.
And we discover that death on a cross is not defeat.

By the grace of God and with the Holy Spirit's life-giving breath, our words can be vehicles of change for the better in this world. The fire God kindles in our hearts is the fire of love and life, not of destruction and death. May we kindle and nurture God's fire in ourselves and in one another. May we honor the bond between heart and mind so that in all our actions and words, others may witness the power of God's Holy Spirit working in us the power that directs and rules our hearts.