

“The Crucified Tongue”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Last week we heard about Jesus healing a deaf man who had a speech impediment. Try to imagine what that must have been like. One moment, you live in complete silence. You can’t hear the wind in the trees or the rain hitting the ground. You can’t sing or listen to music, can’t tell your family and friends that you love them, at least not in words, or hear their voices say the same. Then suddenly, thanks to Jesus, that man emerged from a lifetime of silence into a world of sound. I imagine it was very overwhelming at first, but even greater was the gratitude that man certainly felt. For him, a new chapter of life had begun.

A little later on, Jesus healed a blind man in Bethsaida. Again, we can hardly imagine what it must have been like to emerge from darkness into light, to see colors, the wonders of nature, the smiling faces of loved ones. This particular miracle is unusual, because Jesus had to try twice. After the first attempt, the man could see vaguely, “people,” he said, “but they look like trees.” Jesus then did the exact same thing again, and the man’s vision was fully restored. Was this man somehow blinder than others Jesus had healed? Did Jesus miscalculate the amount of miraculous power needed to restore sight, or was he just tired after all the miracles he’d recently done?

Those are fun things to speculate about, but they aren’t really the right questions. The question is why. Out of all the miracles Jesus did, why would Mark include one where Jesus needed a second try? That’s not exactly a resume polisher. Miracles served as signs to reveal the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. Mark was a huge fan and already had a lot of miracles in the story. He was a meticulous author: focused, disciplined, efficient – shortest gospel out of the

four. So there's got to be a reason for this second-time's-the-charm miracle, and I think we find that reason in today's Gospel.

Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?", and the answers tumbled out: 44% say John the Baptist; 22% go for Elijah, 11% think you're one of the other prophets, and 23% of people have no opinion. Then Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter rang the bell. "You are the Messiah." Jesus went on to explain how he would be publicly humiliated and killed, yet rise again on the third day. This wasn't what anyone expected, and Peter rebuked him, took Jesus off to the side to have a private word, because Peter thought he knew better.

Peter didn't disagree or ask a question or make a suggestion. He judged Jesus. "Look, man, you've gone off the rails here." Jesus hit back hard, with exorcism language. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Here's where that weird healing miracle comes in, because it happened shortly before today's scene. Peter saw that Jesus was the Messiah when no one else could, but Peter's sight was partial. He couldn't envision a Messiah humiliated on a cross. He perceived who Jesus was, but not clearly. So the story of the blind man whose healing took two tries serves as more than just a sign of Jesus' power. It also acts as a symbol for Peter, and for all of us, too.

Just when we think we've got a good bead on Jesus, something new comes into focus, and we realize how fuzzy our picture has been. For example, we often see Jesus as this unfailingly nice person, and then read about him giving Peter a tongue-lashing. We view Jesus as above it all, when in fact he grew frustrated and impatient with his disciples, the crowds, his opponents, his own family – basically everybody, including us sometimes. Some people see this

agitated side of Jesus and conclude that he is a wrathful judge eager to ship sinners straight off to hell.

Nobody has 20/20 vision on Jesus, even in hindsight with the resurrection in our rearview mirror. No matter how smart or biblically literate or prayerful or wise, we need to assume that we're missing something and look harder. We need to seek grace that can heal spiritual sight, and in the meantime, remember that our vision is distorted, and not just when we look at Jesus.

We've all got different angles, different points of view on the world, and we miss a lot. There's so much staring us right in the face that gets filtered out by our brains. It happens without conscious thought, a selection process designed to glean a coherent view of reality from a barrage of inputs. And our brains have a bias toward what we already think we know. We need to remember that, or we wind up like Peter. He thought he saw it all, or at least everything worth seeing, and the one thing he did not see and could not see was Jesus hanging on a cross.

Peter spoke quickly, not pausing to wonder if perhaps he was missing something important. Peter just let loose with his tongue, and wound up in the doghouse for it. We might be tempted to say, "Suits him right. He deserved that," when in fact the proper words are, "Move over, Peter. Make room."

Now we might not tell Jesus off directly, but we sure do flap our tongues when it comes to other people: gossip, rumors, harsh words for people who look or think or feel or behave differently from us. Each one of those people is a child of God, made in the image and likeness of God. They may not know it. They may not act like it. But when we lash out with an unbridled tongue, we have forgotten who we are and have stopped acting like the people God calls us to be. When we wag our tongues at somebody, hoping to hurt them, we've lost sight of the fact that Jesus loves them, too.

In his letter, James described the untamable tongue as, “a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 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. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.” And it’s not just oral.

Plenty of people on social media revel in vulgarity, cruelty, lies. Some chain emails are full of conspiracies and ridiculous claims. Sometimes I actually print them out, just to shred them. Don’t read them, just shred them. I know it’s not environmentally friendly, but it’s much more satisfying than hitting delete. Try it, very cathartic. And before you hit send or reply or forward on an email or like a tweet or Facebook post that involves another person, remember that’s a human being, a child of God, just like you. We’ve all been on the receiving end of verbal nastiness, and know that the idea “words can never hurt me” is rubbish.

To see the truth of Jesus who sacrificed to save, and to act accordingly with disciplined tongues, will take more than the two tries Jesus needed to heal the blind man at Bethsaida. We will say ugly things – and be proud of it, or we’ll be careless and a slip of the tongue will cause harm. We will forget to be kind. Our tongues will start fires that burn people. Some people just like to watch the world burn. Faithful disciples of Jesus do not. We’re the water-bearers of baptism, and the only fire we champion is the cleansing, purifying flame of the Holy Spirit, which does not consume but transforms.

“Show by your good life,” James wrote, “that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. But the wisdom from above is first pure, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace

of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” [vs. 13b-15, 17-18]

Gentleness, wisdom, truth, mercy, impartiality, authenticity, not hypocrisy, but authenticity – these are the fruits of the Spirit that reveal who we really are, that allow us to become the people God wants us to be. When we deny those gifts, when we reject them with tongues bent on doing harm, or tongues that simply slip into meanness, we rebuke Jesus. We rebuke him. We think we know better, like Peter did. “No, Jesus, you’ve got it all wrong. This cross business, this sacrifice stuff you’re talking about isn’t the way to go in the world we live in. Might makes right; Victory to the most brutal!”

But we can repent, when we notice our tongues getting out of line, when prayer leads us to see the harm we cause and the help we could offer instead. When we listen to the gentle correction and encouragement of people we trust who care, we can repent. Jesus is always there, ready to forgive, eager to heal and to help us make amends. Jesus is always here, ready to guide and lead.

You see, the tongue is trainable. It can do amazing things just as easily as it does horrible things. I’d estimate that about 70 - 80% of playing the trumpet is up to the tongue. The best way to hit high notes isn’t to push lots of air. You need to arch the back of your tongue a few millimeters. To play notes rapidly, a trumpet player has to learn how to double-tongue and triple-tongue. It takes great patience and determination to learn how to do those things, but done correctly it helps make beautiful music.

To train our tongues – such a promising muscle yet so dangerous – takes a cross. It takes a cross to train our tongues, because we need to die to the lie that we know better than Jesus. Our tongues need to die to the lie that words don’t really matter, that we can use them

irresponsibly without accountability from anyone, including Jesus. Our tongues need to die to lie that the law of the jungle rules our lives and, therefore, it's a race to the bottom to see how low can you go. Only Jesus rules our lives, if we choose to surrender to him. And only under his rule, can we be free.

A trained tongue carries a cross, because only a cross can train a tongue. A crucified tongue blesses those who hear with words of resurrection hope and peace. A crucified tongue offers wisdom in a world with much foolishness, ignorance, cynicism, and despair. That sort of tongue earns no rebuke from Jesus, only praise. And isn't what Jesus thinks the only thing that really matters? Amen.