

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 2, 2018, The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost/The Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

QUICK AND SLOW

“If you can start the day without caffeine, If you can get going without pep pills, If you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains, If you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles, If you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it, If you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time, If you can take criticism and blame without resentment, ~~If you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him~~, If you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend, If you can conquer tension without medical help, If you can relax without liquor, If you can sleep without the aid of drugs...Then you are probably the family dog!” (Anon.)

Being a human being takes work. Being a Christian human being takes even more work. And I believe that God has gathered us here together this morning to listen to Jesus and James as they call us to pay attention to the ways we are speaking and living our lives.

Specifically, this is a day to check the flow of words from our hearts to our mouths.

This is a day to know once again the power of our words.

As many of you here in this sanctuary know first-hand, an angiogram is a heart procedure that helps check for blockages in the arteries around the heart.

Like an angiogram for the soul, this is a day to check where there are blockages that keep us from saying what needs to be said from our heart of hearts,

or blockages that keep the loving, healing, kind words in and let the angry, destructive words slip out first.

This is a day to look at what kind of strain we're putting on our hearts by not living and speaking the way God calls us to live and speak.

This is a day to look at places where we have narrowed the flow of God's words from our hearts, to our mouths and out to others.

And it's a day to recognize where we may need spiritual bi-pass surgery, to quit using old ways of speaking and being, so we can live healthy lives of faith that show our love for God.

Now the Bible does recognize that a spiritual angiogram is not easy. We're up against an enemy of sorts who gets in the way of the flow of God's words from our hearts and out to others: In the 18th chapter of the book of Proverbs we read: “Life and death are in the power of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21)

In the 3rd chapter of James, he wrote (3: 7-10): “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 and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

It “ought not to be so,” but if we're honest I'm sure all of us here can think of words that came out our mouths that we wanted to grab back as soon as they were spoken.

As I spent time with the passages in Mark and James this week, I was caught by the way our spoken words are portrayed.

In Mark 7: 14 we hear Jesus, in the midst of a religious argument about what foods Jews could eat, say: 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'" Mark 7:14-15

Jesus says what is important is our words that come out of us.
Are we speaking words of life,
or words that bring death to the spirits of those around us?

Do our words bring blessing or cursing to our family, friends, co-workers and students at school around us? We have the power to hurt, or the power to heal, in the words we speak.
God holds us accountable for the way we use our words.

I found an old parable this week that speaks to this:

A person repeated a bit of gossip about a neighbor. Within a few days the whole community knew the story. The one it concerned was deeply hurt and offended. Later, the person responsible for spreading the rumor learned that it was completely untrue. The person was very sorry and went to a wise old sage to find out what could do to repair the damage. "Go to the marketplace," he said, "and purchase a chicken, and have it killed. Then on your way home, pluck its feathers and drop them one by one along the road." Although surprised by this advice, the person did what the sage had advised. The next day the wise man said, "Now, go and collect all those feathers you dropped yesterday and bring them back to me."

The person followed the same road, but to much dismay the wind had blown all the feathers away. After searching for hours, the person returned with only three in hand.

"You see," said the old sage, "it's easy to drop them, but it is impossible to get them back. So it is with gossip. It doesn't take much to spread a rumor, but once you do you can never completely undo the wrong."

Jesus said that what comes out of us can hurt others. In James 1:18 we find the next step of our spiritual Angiogram. James reminds us what really is in our heart of hearts: In his translation The Message, Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. ...He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.

The God who spoke creation into being, saying "Let there be light," has given us true life by speaking to our hearts—bringing us to life by using the true Word. James says that God has implanted the Word of truth in each of our hearts, and that Word has the power to save our souls, and guide our speaking and actions.

We are not in this alone, the words of God's love, Christ's salvation, and the Holy Spirit's guidance have been put in our hearts by God. Many people who have a medical Angiogram done, end up having stents placed in some of their major arteries. These are wire mesh tubes that help hold the arteries open once they've had the buildup and blockages removed.

As God's children we have had spiritual stents placed in our hearts. God's word is there within us, preventing blockages, so that God's words can flow from our hearts, out our mouths, and into the world around us.

So, we need to remember we are not alone as we try to live a Christian life, guarding what we say, so that people know we belong to God.

There is a truth-telling prayer that some of you may know. It goes like this:

“Dear God, so far today, I've done all right.

I haven't gossiped, and I haven't lost my temper.

I haven't been grumpy, nasty or selfish, and I'm really glad of that!

But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed,

and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help. Thank you! Amen”

James and Jesus say to us: your words have power, and the True word of God has been put in your heart and given you life.

James continues: “If you think you are a religious person, but you do not bridle your tongue, you are deceiving your heart and your religion is worthless.”

So, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. “

James says: Don't just listen to God's words and think they're nice,

listen to God's words and Act on them: “be doers of the word and not merely hearers.”

Perhaps you've heard the story of the man who was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy street (or maybe it was John Deere Road during all the construction.) Suddenly, the light turns yellow, just in front of him. He does the right thing, and stops at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman hits the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration as she misses her chance to get through the intersection with him. As she is still in mid-rant, she hears a tap on her window and looks up into the very serious face of a police officer.

The officer orders her to exit her car with her hands up. He takes her to the police station where she is searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approaches the cell and opens the door. She is escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer is waiting with her personal effects. He says, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, gesturing at the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'Choose Life Love' license plate holder, the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk."

"Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

James says: “If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God,...is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world...be doers of the words and not just hearers.”

We all need spiritual Angiograms from time to time when we can feel the strain on our heart that comes from living a life that is distant from God.

When we let the word of God live in our hearts, we'll have eyes to see where there are blockages. We'll be able to see the narrowing of the flow of words from God's heart, to our heart, to the people who fill our daily lives, and we can ask God for help.

And sometimes we may need some spiritual bi-pass surgery to begin a new way of living lives that are faithful to God in both our words and deeds. Because ultimately James reminds us that the life of faith isn't just about what we say, it is about what we do for those in need.

At the end of our spiritual Angiogram, this is our final question: What are you going to do? What you say when you leave this place is important, and what you do is important. Both are part of the life of faith!

I want to leave you with a picture of what this looks like. Whenever you pick up a spoon today and into the rest of the week, I hope you will be reminded of this story.

A woman had a dream. In the dream, she asked God, "What are heaven and hell like. I would like to see them." So God led the woman to two doors. God opened one of the doors and the woman looked in. In the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew which smelled delicious and made the woman's mouth water. But the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They were starving.

Each person held a spoon with a very long handle that was strapped to their arm and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arm, they could not get the spoons back into their mouth. The woman shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. That is hell, said God.

They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the woman's mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arm, they could not get the spoons back into their mouth.

But here the people were well nourished and laughing and talking.

"I don't understand," said the woman.

It is simple" said God, "it requires but one skill. They've learned to feed each other.