### “Who Do You Say?” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 15, 2024

**James 3:1, 4–10**

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. . . 4Look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. . .

6And 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. . . 9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

**Mark 8:27–32**

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly.

Welcome back to First Church! Within our familiar routines we are ready to make new discoveries. We now are firmly within the school year and the church year, and we will visit the lessons of the lectionary, which is our cycle of Bible readings, to find what our lessons are for today.

In the James passage the tongue is the star, or maybe the villain. It can bless God or curse those made in the likeness of God (3:9). It can guide the whole body, but it can also stain the whole body (3:4, 6). It shouldn’t be that way, James says. These negatives should not be. James is appealing to our conscience and to our need to practice self-control: make the tongue an honorable member of the body instead of a shameful one. Angry words are like toothpaste; once spoken, they cannot be put back.

Jesus asks his apostles to confess what they have heard people say he is, and who *the apostles* say he is. This is where we hear Peter’s great profession, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29). In Matthew, Peter makes a fuller statement: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). And Jesus then points out to him that flesh and blood have not shown this to him, but the Father in heaven has revealed it (16:17). And on this insight, this recognition of Jesus’ divinity, he will build his church. Jesus was a divine being, living among humans, with divine lessons to give. But it was too early and too dangerous to be proclaiming his Messiahship publicly just yet. In both gospels he tells them not to talk publicly about Peter’s insight. He also warns them that the elders and chief priests will reject him and arrange to have him killed. They need to not hasten that day by proclaiming his Messiahship. They need a few years to get the movement spreading.

When Jesus speaks, do you notice that he does not say anything about dying for their sins? He does not say that he needs to die in order for salvation to take place. He knows that the opposition from the priests will lead to his death. And so he issues a matter-of-fact warning about the coming violence, and also about his subsequent resurrection. Jesus loves his apostles, and he wants them to be ready for the trauma and intense emotion that he foresees they will experience. But he teaches nothing about atonement—that is, his death being a substitution or a payment for sin.

In this and in the other eight instances where he warns the apostles about his coming execution, salvation is simply not linked to his death. Atonement is not part of Jesus’ teaching, but is added later with the teaching of Paul, and then of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of some of the other New Testament letters. It is interesting to note that James, who is the Lord’s brother, also never teaches atonement, nor does he link salvation to the death of Jesus in any way.

I am not alone in being very uncomfortable with the doctrine of salvation through a substitutionary death. Many scholars and lay people see the idea of atonement as a later interpretation, a doctrine which comes partly from Paul but mostly from Luther and Calvin. The substitutionary idea says that Jesus needed to come to earth in order to appease God’s wrath, that Jesus died to bear a penalty in place of all humans, also described as a redemption-payment that purchased our salvation. This means that God was so angry that only payment in blood could suffice, that he was paid off with a blood-payment, and that this payment in blood helped to restore God’s honor, his honor having been affronted by human sin. Does this sound like the infinite and loving God to you? It is a crude image and not part of Jesus’ teaching, and that is why I am uncomfortable with the blood-purchase wording I find in some hymns. The real problem is not what it says about Jesus, but what it says about God, and God’s supposed need for a victim as a means to restore God’s honor.

Why would an infinite God need any sacrificial ritual? “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?” Micah asked (6:7). How much less would he want a *human* sacrifice? This is not Jesus’ teaching about God. This teaching comes from later interpretation, which pictured the death as a substitutionary payment.

But we know that Jesus taught of God’s generous desire to save people. He showed that God need not be persuaded or paid, but *wanted* to save people. Jesus said “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). We see this desire to save people illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the loving father doesn’t impose any penalties, any payback, on the wandering son, and doesn’t even need to hear the son’s planned confession, but wants only to celebrate his return (Luke 15:21–24). The father is overflowing with love in the parable. And the son accepts the father’s abundant love.

Jesus wanted people to recognize the amazing love of the Father. He came to reveal God to us (John 1:14, 18; 14:9). He said “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37).

It was Jesus’ entire life and ministry that had a saving effect upon people, not his

death as some kind of magic transaction. There is no magic in blood. When he healed and saved people, he never said, “you are saved, assuming that you believe in an interpretation of my death that will come along in a few years, which will say that my death is a payment for your sins.”

Jesus also came, as the Epistle to the Hebrews said, to “share flesh and blood” with his children, so that he could “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 2:14; 4:15). Thus, he freely bestowed his life upon humanity, and that included his heroic death, but this death was not primary over the whole life. Furthermore, Jesus saves because of *who he is*, not because of what was *done to him*. The Resurrection showed that he had power over death, and that we need not fear death.

So Jesus did not have to be killed. Paul said that if the rulers of his age had known who Jesus was “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). The great medieval philosopher Duns Scotus said that the incarnation of the Son in human form was not a contingency plan to pay for sins, but was “willed through eternity as an expression of God’s love . . . and desire for union with creation” ([www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/the-franciscan-saints-john-duns-scotus/](http://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/the-franciscan-saints-john-duns-scotus/)). The desire to bond with humans is an essential part of the Incarnation. And still do Jesus and God reach out to all of us with welcome, allowing us to connect with them in order to partake of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).

Jesus needed to feel hunger, pain, exertion, fatigue, worry, human friendship, and the satisfaction of *human* achievement. Jesus needed not just to be the distant creator who knows everything, but to humble himself to share the blood, sweat, and tears of human life *in* a human life and *as* a human being. In the experience of Jesus, God directly experienced human life.

One of the main purposes of the Incarnation was that the divine should *personally* experience what humans experience, so that God and Jesus could really “sympathize

with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). Jesus had to experience a full human life. It turns out that people made him experience human cruelty and judicial injustice, as well. We made him drink that cup. He showed kindness and unselfishness to the very end. His revelation of divine goodness, through *everything* that he experienced, was the essential meaning of the Incarnation.

“Who do you say that I am?” is still important. As the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Creator of life on earth, Jesus has inherent saving power. Jesus is the Savior, not because of his death, but because of his divine identity. He knew it was important who his followers thought he was.

The wonders that he works are by the “finger of God,” he brings the kingdom of God to earth (Luke 11:20), and he lives a life of truth-revealing. So you can imagine Jesus asking you: “who do you say I am?” I hope your answer includes an affirmation of his divinity, a recognition of his need to experience a full human life, to drink the cup all the way down, and an appreciation of his mission of revealing God to humanity.

I am asking you to acknowledge his divinity, his godliness, to recognize that he had to come to be with us, to live a full human life, and to accept that Jesus came to reveal God to humankind. Jesus is our pathway to God. If we see the lovingkindness of Jesus then we know what God is like. He also revealed to God what a human life could be like. As Hebrews says, “we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (4:15).

Jesus knows us, accepts us as we are. He is offering us a place in the family of God and we, like the prodigal son, do not have to pay anything (or have anybody else pay *for* us). We can turn away from sin, receive the love of the Father, and come into the family of God—the brotherhood/sisterhood of humanity. May the love, peace, and joy of God fill your lives.