

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost



16 September 2018

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

Perhaps you've noticed that for the entire month of September our New Testament reading comes from the Epistle of James. James is a short letter and we are fortunate to hear a good chunk of it in these five September Sundays. In contrast with Paul, the author of so many letters who was a sophisticated theological writer, James is more of a simple, homespun, down to earth author. With James, what you see is what you get and his overall message is straightforward: be good, stop sinning and live simple, humble, properly ordered lives centered on God and doing the right thing - because doing and saying the right things matter.

James's focus on right actions and right speech helps explain the centuries-old debate between his teachings and Paul's. Paul, of course, emphasized faith above works but today we have James who presents right action as the mark of true faith. We must also notice that James is a wisdom writer, which means he looks to the natural world for demonstrations of divine truths; again, using less doctrinal exposition than Paul. Instead, James refreshingly counts on real life to help make his points, coming up with everyday illustrations that allow listeners to judge the truth of what he presents.

Today's passage from James offers multiple metaphors in which he make his case: how bits work in the mouths of horses, how rudders work on ships, how small fires cause big fires, how no single spring pours forth two kinds of water, how fig trees do not produce olives, nor grapevines figs. All of these images point us toward important truths that still hold today - small actions and words can produce very large effects. In short, what we do and say matter, actions and words - they matter tremendously and it is dangerous folly to think they do not. And so let's spend a few minutes this morning letting James teach and remind us how and why deeds and words matter, why they always have and always will.

I hope you've spotted the two new bright faces up here with us - Crystal and Jonathan. They are our two seminarians here to experience practical ministry in a parish setting alongside their academic work at Virginia Theological Seminary. One of the first things we share with all seminarians is that what we do and say in worship matters. At Christ Church we treat liturgy with reverence, in all we do and say, acting deliberately and purposefully we bring our best actions and words to our worship. Conversely we discourage casual, interpretative, impulsive acts and words. James explains the reason behind our intentionality: All of us make many mistakes, he reminds. And James's caution's about the unworthiness of the human tongue reinforces why, when we worship, we do it by the book - in this case the BCP - we never wing it. In short, we are called to bring and offer our best to God and we need to be very careful in that effort, hence the importance of keeping the structure and order of our beautiful liturgy.

These truths about actions and words bearing importance are of course also reflected in the larger world in which we live. James's warnings about action and language and consequence are all the more pressing in the twenty-first century. As we move even further into the information age, we also move ever further into the disinformation age. Always powerful, language now reaches farther and faster than ever before and James's keen insight about the human tongue, how it has the power to stain the whole body and set on fire the cycle of nature, rings eerily clear today.

But I would also like for us to consider how actions and words matter in even more ordinary ways. Here now we're coming down into the very familiar, the very simple. Our individual actions and words matter in minute ways that we so often completely forget to notice or be aware of. For example, there is nothing quite so devastating as a carefully placed inflection in conversation. We all know how this works, in conversation about another person a slight one syllable "OH?" with raised eyebrows is tossed in and that is all it takes to introduce doubt or rumor. And I am certain that just by being distracted I probably impose countless unintentional unkindness on others. In other words, our actions and words can cause harm simply because we go about our days unaware or preoccupied or hazily distracted and self-absorbed.

To all of this James's message is clear: Wake up, live intentionally, be careful, put God first and forefront, be doers and proclaimers of the word, not just receivers. It is the everyday kindnesses that add up, tiny act upon tiny act, single word upon single word, these are the building blocks that eventually lead to a life well and faithfully lived. That kind gesture in the grocery store, in the bottle-neck of traffic, to the stranger or to those we love - those gestures actually matter. What we do and say matter. Whether in worship, or work, or play or home - James reminds us that actions and words matter tremendously.

I realize that the theory of the Butterfly Effect came long after James wrote his letter but I can't help but wonder if he had some intuition about chaos theory. The metaphorical example is that a tornado can be influenced by minor disturbances such as the flapping of the wings of a butterfly. So it is with our lives. It's hubris to think we are as in control as we tend to think we are. But what we can control is our deeds and our tongues. James wisely reminds us today that a claim to faith without right actions and right words is dead and that is by our actions that our faith is manifested to the world.

Amen.



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