

Sermon: Making Worlds Together

Year B, Proper 19

[Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38](#)

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You walk into the kitchen. Someone you love is standing, back to you, with the fridge door open. Without turning around they say, “There’s nothing to eat.” Here’s the thing that we all know. That is not our cue to peer over their shoulder and say, “Darling. Look, there’s tomato paste. And, oh, a half inch of crab apple jelly!”

No, we know that “there’s nothing to eat” said in front of almost every American refrigerator is code for something. But what it’s code for ... that’s where our tongues set fires we didn’t mean to set. Is it code for, “I wanted a meatloaf sandwich and there’s only tuna in here”? Is it code for “It was your turn to go to the grocery store”? Or maybe, “You’ve been gambling again and trying to cover it up.” There are so many things it can be code for. It changes from house to house, from one moment to another inside each marriage. With one kid it means you don’t love them and with the other it means that another hormone storm has moved in and perhaps it’s time to drive them to Sam’s Club and let them free sample until they’re evicted.

We may not think about it, but we make worlds out of our words.¹ Half the time when we’re fighting about there being nothing to eat, we’re fighting because one of us lives in the world where we’re going out for dinner and the other one of us lives in a world careful management is the only thing standing between us and chaos. We fight and we’re not fighting about the same thing until somehow someone catches on that we’re not both talking about going to Chrysanthi’s for chowder.

We make worlds out of our words. We made a world where American capitalism would provide growth and opportunity for everyone. And that world ended with planes flying into the World Trade Center because someone else made a different world out of different words. We made a world out of the Declaration of Independence only to discover that other people had used the very same words to make a very different world, a whole series of different worlds, in fact. And those worlds clash and clash and clash.

No wonder that James said we needed to bridle our tongues. No wonder that he compared them to wild animals and wild fires. This one tiny part of us (a tongue is about 3¼ inches long²) gets us into so much trouble.

In today’s story from the Gospel of Mark, we see Peter following his tongue right into trouble. Jesus and the disciples are headed from Galilee, where they’ve been teaching and preaching, healing and casting out demons, to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Jesus will confront the authorities with words. He’ll challenge them to see that following his way of peace and love and non-violence will bring forth the Kingdom of God. They’ll respond with words of their own, and actions, and at the end, he will *undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed* (Mark 8:31). There is no way that anyone looking at it from

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Proper 19, Homiletical Perspective, James 3:1-12” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 67.

² BBC News Services, “Magazine Monitor: How long is the average tongue?” September 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-29144165> (accessed September 9, 2015).

the outside would say that the world Jesus built with his words survived its contact with the real world in Jerusalem. How many times have the worlds built on the worlds of peace and love and non-violence survived contact with the real world?

But the Gospel of Mark was not written for outsiders. It was written for the insiders. So on the journey to Jerusalem and to the cross, Mark gives us these moments to catch a glimpse of what was really going on.

Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* (Mark 8:27). What's the gossip? What's the scuttle butt? What world is being created out there? They tell him there's a variety of opinions, maybe the reincarnation of John the Baptist (who had just been killed so recently that some of them, like Jesus, had been baptized by John) or the reincarnation of Elijah, the prophet who had defended the worship of the God of Israel when things started to go off the rails. Or maybe some other new prophet. But in any event, the people thought Jesus was the guy who came before the One Promised by God.

So Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do you say I am?* (Mark 8:29). Peter replies, *You are the Messiah* (Mark 8:29). In this moment, we are more insiders than Peter. We see him getting the title right, but not understanding the meaning.³ Jesus wants to keep them from talking about him as the Messiah until they understand what that means, that's why he tells them to keep quiet.

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man.⁴ In the ministry he is currently offering, there with the disciples in the cities of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is the one through whom God deals with the world. Jesus sees that he will die and rise again to do God's work for humanity. When Jesus rises, he will show where the relationship with God and humanity leads; it leads to glory. But to do this work as a Messiah, he will come into conflict with the ordinary world, not just because regular people reject him, but because he rejects them. He rejects all the power seeking and self serving activities they pursue. He knows that the way to God is through denying everything on their daily to-do list that means they acquire more power, more money, more influence.

If that's what Messiah means, what does that mean for the disciples? They have to let go of thinking about their own selves. Jesus is not asking them to suffer for suffering's sake. He's not asking them to obliterate who they are. It doesn't mean giving up Chrysanthi's chowder because self-denial makes you a better person. Jesus is saying that if he is the Messiah, there is only one path left. To follow him. We can suffer without following Jesus. We can give up who we are without Jesus. We can deny ourselves pleasure without following Jesus. People do that all the time. What we can't do without Jesus is follow him.

And if we follow him, we head directly away from our instinct to save our lives and to join up with a savior whose power can save us from the dangers of the world. At the end of the reading from Mark today, Jesus is pointing out some plain home truths to his disciples. You don't possess your own life anyway. If you try to secure your life by gaining control of the world, you will exhaust your life and end up being controlled by the world anyway. You can't even logically raise enough money to buy your own life back from God, so why bother? There is one way forward, following Jesus, living life in the divine and social context in which it is set.

³ Harry B. Adams, "Proper 19, Pastoral Perspective, Mark 8:27-38" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 70.

⁴ James Luther Mays, "Exposition of Mark 8:27-9:1." *Interpretation* 30, no. 2 (1976): 174-178. This article provided the argument line I followed for the portion of the sermon dealing with Mark 8.

No wonder Jesus is so firm with Peter. *Get behind me* (Mark 8:33). Get back to where a disciple is supposed to be, following in the path of the One Promised by God. Peter got out from behind Jesus and had taken him aside and rebuked him, like he was a mouthy teenager or an overconfident direct report at work. Jesus is right. Peter's thinking like a human, that there is some way to avoid thinking and talking about death and suffering and still live in this world. No wonder Jesus calls him Satan. Peter calls one world into being, the one in which Jesus is the Messiah. And then his actions show that Peter is still living in another world, where the Messiah has not yet come. Peter's opposing what Jesus has been trying to teach all along. That life in the real world is lived in the divine and social context in which it is set.

We bring worlds into being with our words. We tell ourselves that we are safe because of the First Responders. We are. And we are profoundly grateful for your service. You come when we are frightened or threatened or ill. You know how tackle situations that drive us further into fear and threat and illness. You show up in the face of violence or loss, you show up when our bodies fail and when our loved ones are beyond our ability to help them. You do so without qualm, without hesitation, relying on each other and your training to keep our community safe. You see things and know things that we are glad to not see or know. You carry a burden for us through your service.

Still we need to tell more of that story. The First Responders keep the community safe. And the community keeps the First Responders safe. You offer the first response. But the story never ends with the first response. There needs to be round after round of response, so that no one is hurt and no one is frightened. The more thoroughly the community responds to the social context in which we all live, the safer the First Responders are to do their jobs. If the rest of the community is doing our job, we are finding ever more ways to take care of each other, to make sure when people are hurt by others reckless pursuit of selfish goals, that someone is stepping in to fill the gaps.

We are grateful for your work and for your willingness to worship with us today. We know that not everyone is committed to following Jesus, even if it is a path that we follow. For those of us who do, we see the divine as part of our community. We pray for you and the work you do. We pray for us that we may be able to do our part and bear our burdens as well as you bear yours. We pray that following Jesus trains us to help more readily and more thoroughly, that all the responses after the first one are as diligently and carefully accomplished. We pray that we may become the community that makes your job safer and easier to accomplish. We pray that world we are bringing into being together, all of us, is the world where all are whole and safe.