

Word Up!

Sermon, September 2, 2018

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

As you know, the heart is the central organ that regulates the flow of blood which makes its way through our bodies. When something is wrong with the heart, when the heart is *diseased*, it is a matter of grave concern. When the flow of the blood is hindered ... when it is not properly pumped, refreshed with the fresh air from the lungs, and circulated throughout our bodies ... we become tired, listless, out of breath, we become lightheaded or dizzy, or if the flow is blocked completely, we become dead. So we have electrocardiograms, echocardiograms, blood pressure cuffs, angiograms ... a whole battery of medical diagnostic machinery to monitor the heart, because we should be always on the alert for symptoms of a diseased heart.

A few of you may remember this came home to me six years ago, which was also the last time we looked at these lectionary passages. In January 2012 I had my first ever EKG (*prior to that I hadn't had a complete medical physical in, oh, seventeen years; I figured it was maybe time to do so*), and was mildly amused by all the sticky contacts and wires pasted all over my chest and legs. My amusement abated, however, when the doctor, after examining the results, requested I undergo a chest X-ray. After the X-ray, he then asked me if I have had any history of heart trouble. "Not that I know of," I replied. "Uh ... why do you ask?" I don't remember the exact words, but the conversation went something like this: "Well, you have a rather large heart." ("I'm a pastor; I'm supposed to have a big heart.") He explained that an enlarged heart can be a sign of an *overworked* heart, which has grown and swelled to compensate for damage that may have occurred from heart disease and/or a silent heart attack. I countered by saying I've long been a runner (*I had run four marathons, a few half marathons and a number of 10K runs in previous years, not to mention all the informal running in between*), that I've read athletes' hearts can often be larger than usual and may be misdiagnosed (*there is even a term for it called AHS, or Athletic Heart Syndrome*)¹ and besides, my blood pressure and resting heart rate (*which I've always monitored on my own since my early thirties*) have long been well within safe levels ... plus, I had no memory at all of anything even resembling a heart attack. To which he replied, "Yes, but I'd still like for you to see a cardiologist." I asked if it could wait until after the following weekend, for I had plane tickets and travel plans to run the Key West Half Marathon. He smiled (*somewhat sardonically, I think*), and simply said, "Be careful."

Yikes! All of a sudden, my heart was at the complete center of my attention! To make a long story short, I became hypersensitive to any tightness, discomfort or pain, real or imagined, for the next few weeks, wondering if "the big one" was immanent. I cautiously ran extra-slowly that weekend in Key West (*and I don't normally run all that fast to begin with*). The following month I underwent a whole battery of tests at the cardiology office involving treadmills, radioactive isotopes, scans, another EKG, (*which was still "irregular"*) an echocardiogram. To make a long story a bit shorter, nothing conclusive was found, so I've kept on running ... but have also remained somewhat hyper vigilant about my heart care, made lasting changes in my diet and nutrition, and still get (*perhaps overly*) concerned with any chest discomfort or pain, real or imagined. Because we should be always on the alert for symptoms of a diseased heart.

The heart has also long been a symbol of one's innermost character, one's innermost character, feelings, or inclinations. In fact, I've learned that "heart" in this sense occurs over a thousand times in the Bible, making it the most common anthropological term in the Scripture.² And a common thread winding its way through our lectionary readings this morning is that we really do wear our hearts on our mouths, not so much (*as the old saying goes*) on our sleeves. The Psalmist, our Lord Jesus, and Jesus' younger brother James would all say two accurate indicators of the condition of our heart are (a) our observable actions and (b) what comes out of our mouths. Mark 7:21-23 -- "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' " When something is wrong with that "heart," when that center is diseased, when that center is not pure, it is also a matter of grave concern. And we should always be on the alert for symptoms of a diseased heart the Psalmist, our Lord Jesus, and Jesus' younger brother would certainly concur.

A wee bit of background: James, believed to be the (*half*) brother of Jesus, was also the head of the established church in Jerusalem. His epistle is not a missionary letter to very young churches like most of the other epistles; rather, his letter was written for those who had been in old Mother Church for some time. James assumes his readers would be familiar with Paul's teaching of living by faith, but James' overall point is there

¹ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20070804224904/http://healthresources.caremark.com/topic/ahs>

² See <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/heart/>

ought to be some implications to that faith. That faith ought to change the way we live *and* the way we speak. In chapter one James wrote about the implications of that faith for facing trials and hardships, for giving generously and taking care of the widows and orphans. In chapter two James talks about the importance of climbing down off the social ladder, of being merciful to those who have sinned, and putting your faith to work by taking huge risks for God, as did Abraham and Rahab. He makes clear the point it's not enough to just believe in God; that only makes you as good as the devil, because even the devil believes in God. No, James says, faith without deeds is no faith. It is dead; to mix metaphors, it has no heartbeat. In the third chapter James then comes back to the crucial point of keeping a tight reign on that most powerful muscle of the human body, the human tongue. If you read through this epistle in one sitting, you may get the feeling this is the point of the whole letter, that this is what James has been trying to get at the whole time: that more than anything else, the condition of our heart and the quality of our faith is evident by our use or misuse of words. You've heard the phrase, "*Man up!*" Well, I think James would say we need to "WORD up." We need to be careful with our words!

"*Word Up!*" Some of you know that's also a popular slang term in some sectors of the U.S. population. I looked up the phrase in the **Urban Dictionary**, which had this first listing: "*WORD UP: I comprehend what you are saying and verify that your statement is true, my good brother.*" Word up! is an affirmative response; an acknowledgement, an indication of approval ... much like another word we talked about a few weeks ago ... Amen! (I'm in!) Word up!, at times, is often abbreviated further to just "Word." Again, from the **Urban Dictionary**: a four-fold definition -- "*Word: 1. I agree. 2. a program used to type things on the computer. 3. the only word in the vocabulary of Justin Timberlake. 4. A couple letters bunched up together which make sense to us humans.*"

James is saying we need to be careful with "*those couple letters bunched up together which make sense to us humans!*" We just read, "*Be quick to listen and slow to speak.*" "*If you think you are religious and can't keep a tight rein on your tongue, you're deceiving yourself and your religion is worthless.*" Remember, this is written by a leader in a long-established church, someone who has seen how much good *and* how much damage can be done to people with the human tongue. Think back to some of the greatest hurts you have experienced in your life. The chances are great you can still remember some of the harsh words spoken at the time. "*Can't you do anything right?*" Or, "*How can you be so (fill in the blank ... stupid, careless, heartless, etc.)?*" Or, "*Why can't you be more like ...*" Don't raise your hand, but how many here have used that last question with your spouse or your child? Any time we make such a comparison, what that spouse or that child hears is, "*I respect/like that other person so much more than you. Why can't you be him/her/them?*" You know, there are some words that you just never say, even if you're feeling them at the time. You just don't say them, because they will never be forgotten. No one ever forgets words of hurt. No one ever forgets hearing, "I don't love you" whether spoken directly or by implication.

I've used this illustration before, but some of you know the cause of death for George Washington was strep throat. However, contributing to his debilitated state was the old medical practice of *bloodletting*. Thinking they were helping, doctors had bled the so-called "bad blood" from Washington to such a point that he was gravely weakened, so much so that a rather mild infection/affliction became lethal. We now know bloodletting is bad medicine. However, there are still those who think word-letting is good therapy, that people just have to get it all out, get it off their chests, speak their minds, get the bad blood out. **NO!** Words hurt, and no one ever forgets hearing hurtful words. To mix metaphors, there are better ways to unload a shotgun than just blasting off. People can get really hurt when a shotgun blasts off. I think James would say, "*Unless you are planning on using your tongue to bless someone, just stop talking.*" Paraphrased, that's "*Word up or shut up!*" One of the main reasons people like animals so much is that they don't talk. In this case, you might say there are times where our faith encourages us to act like animals.

In Chapter 3 James wrote, "*With the tongue, we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in God's likeness. From the same mouth come praise and cursing, my brothers, this should not be!*" James intimates, don't keep coming to worship thinking we can bless God in our prayers and songs and then continue saying bad things about others. We can't do that. According to the Bible, that's a sign of a diseased heart. The people about whom we are speaking are created in the image of God. When we curse others, James says, we curse God. A pretty accurate measure of how much of God's grace and forgiveness we've taken to heart can be seen in how we respond to those around us who are in need of grace and mercy. And we are all in need of grace and mercy. Genuinely forgiven people are not so self-righteous about the sins of others. When we genuinely encounter the grace of God, the only real response is deep gratitude ... and grateful people really only want to do one thing ... they want to give. Mostly, they want to give blessings. According to James, a healthy heart, a heart made pure by grace, manifests itself in words that bless.

So ... WORD UP! Let us use our words graciously and well. We really do wear our hearts on our mouths.