

# WE REALLY DO WEAR OUR HEARTS ON OUR MOUTHS

Sermon, August 29, 2021

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

"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.'"

Mark 7:21-23

I think a common thread winding its way through our lectionary readings this morning, including our Psalter Call to Worship, 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 ... well, technically, his half-brother ... 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.

As you know, the physical heart is the central organ that regulates the flow of blood which makes its way through our bodies. When something is wrong with the physical heart, when the heart is *diseased*, when the heart is *not pure*, it is a matter of grave concern, for this hinders the flow of blood ... something I get more concerned about with every passing year. 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 susceptible to all kinds of disease: 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 echocardiograms, blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes, nuclear stress tests, angiograms ... a whole battery of medical diagnostic machinery to attempt to monitor the heart, because we should always be on the alert for symptoms and causes of a diseased heart.

The heart has long been a symbol of love. Just as the physical heart is that central part of us which regulates the flow of blood through our bodies, so the symbolic heart represents that central part of our being which "regulates" the love that flows through our lives. When something is wrong with THAT "heart," when that center is diseased, when that center is not pure ... OR when that heart is broken or starved ... it is also a matter of grave concern. For when the flow of life-giving and life-sustaining love so necessary to human happiness and healthy relationships and overall well-being is hindered or blocked or diminished, when it isn't refreshed with the fresh air of loving human interaction, mutual sharing, companionship and encouragement, when love doesn't circulate throughout our lives ... we then become susceptible to all kinds of dis-ease, we become tired, we become listless, cynical, out of energy, we become drained of desire, life is diminished and we ... lose heart. Cut off from the circulation of love as many have unfortunately been under pandemic restriction and/or other reasons, living in isolation and idleness behind locked doors, clinicians are reporting depression and drug abuse rates are just skyrocketing. We should always be on the alert for symptoms and causes of a diseased heart. And the Psalmist, our Lord Jesus, and Jesus' younger brother would agree.

James, believed by many church historians to be the (*half*) brother of Jesus (*and this isn't the forum to discuss/debate the belief some hold of the perpetual virginity of mother Mary*), 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 ought to be some implications to that faith. That faith ought to change the way you live *and* the way you 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. James 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. It has no heart.

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. When you read through this epistle in one sitting, you 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. The last time we looked at these verses of the lectionary cycle, I looked up the phrase "Word up" 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.'*" So, "Word up!" is an affirmative response; an acknowledgement, an indication of approval and agreement ... much like another word we talked about a few weeks ago, "Amen!" (I'm in!) "Word up!" is, at times, often abbreviated even 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 read in James, *"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 ... even in the name of God.

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 like that other person so much more than you. Why can't you be him/her/them?"* You know, there are some words 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 (*he passed away as a young man of 67*). 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 can 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 that happens; keep your finger off the trigger! 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!" I'm convinced 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.

Now, to be sure, there are most certainly times we need to speak out, speak up, and speak to others. In fact, there are times we **MUST** speak up ... especially in these troubled times. However, we must do so intelligently, cautiously, lovingly, truthfully and carefully. The tongue is a dangerous weapon.

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, lovingly, constructively, intelligently and well. We really do wear our hearts on our mouths.