

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 19
Year B

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116:1-8
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Many commentators hold that the Letter of James is the only wisdom book in the New Testament. They compare it to the Book of Proverbs and the apocryphal book of Sirach. Thus, we might look at this letter in a different light than the letters of Paul. Paul is widely seen as a theologian, one who explains how our belief in God impacts our worship and life. James is devoted to how our lives, as Christians, impact those around us. This is clearly shown in the reading today. Here, James is focused on how we use language.

James begins this passage with a warning to those who teach. We might think he is only speaking to those who stand before a classroom of students or, perhaps, someone who preaches. I think we need to take a much wider view of who James feels are teachers. As we examine his words of caution, we see he is talking to anyone who has influence over others - teachers, preachers, employers, and even parents and grandparents. How any of us use words greatly impacts those who hear us.

We all know that the tone of our voice can carry as much meaning as the words we use. We can say the same words with different tones with vastly different effects. As a child, we may remember our mother calling us. If my mother called me by a nickname, I could be sure that everything was ok. However, if she called me formally with a stern tone, I knew I was in trouble. We also know this happens in the business place or in schools. The words we choose and the tone we use conveys much.

We also see language used to build up or tear down people. By selecting expressions that have cultural meaning - usually negative - we send message to all who hear us. Last week, we explored how we treat people and how we differentiate between those we honor and those who we feel might be less worthy of our respect through our actions. We do the same thing with words and speech. We show our respect or disrespect by the words we choose and the tone we take.

Is our language condescending? Do we talk down to people? Or, do we try to build people up by the way we talk to them? People judge us all the time. James cautions that those who teach will be judged more strictly. I don't believe he is talking about the judgment at the last day. James is reminding us that we are judged every time we speak - by those who hear us and by God. If we are known as Christians, can the same mouth that praises God on Sunday ridicule a coworker on Monday? As James says, the same water supply cannot give us both fresh water and salt water. In the same way, our voices cannot both praise God and tear down someone else. People judge us and God judges us.

Through the words we use and the tone we employ, we can either destroy someone or build them up. God has given people a unique gift of speech. God has also given us the freedom to use that gift as we desire. We can use it for good or evil. We can use it for the building up of others or for their destruction. The choice is ours. As James reminds us at the end of the first chapter of this letter, true religion is taking care in how we speak, giving care to those in distress, and being careful about what we let into our lives. This is the measure of true wisdom. Our language is the core of how we exhibit our faith. How are you being judged?