

Lesson Plan

James 3:1-12; Mark 8: 27-38

Whitefish UMC

Rally Sunday, September 13, 2009

- † If you tuned into President Obama’s speech to the joint session of Congress Wednesday night right in the middle, as I did, you might have thought you’d happened upon a session of the British Parliament instead. Have you ever watched or read about the verbal brawls that take place there?
- † In Britain, backbenchers (the opposition) say all kinds of nasty and unkind things to the Prime Minister, and it’s televised on the BBC here in the U.S. I confess that I can’t stand to watch it.
- † In our country, the President’s addresses to Congress usually are met with either stony silence from the opposing party or cheers from the President’s partisans. That is, until Wednesday, when a Congressman from South Carolina yelled “You lie!” to the President in the middle of his speech.
- † Chastened by members of his own party, including John McCain, who opposed President Obama in last year’s election, the emotional Congressman apologized to the President within an hour following the speech. The President accepted his apology, saying something to the effect that “everybody makes mistakes.”
- † In case you haven’t noticed, it’s getting ugly out in the political world. Liberals accuse Conservatives of being Neanderthals. Conservatives accuse Liberals of being Socialists or worse. It’s enough to make you want to bury your head under the covers, or at least unplug your TV.

- † Don't you hope that all those people shouting at each other read today's passage from the letter of James?
- † Here we have James warning his listeners that it is difficult to guard the tongue. It looks as if James singles out teachers (and preachers), maybe because they make their living with words, or maybe because they are judged more strictly than others.
- † But before you let yourself off the hook, remember that each one of us teaches not just with our words but our very lives. And that's what James is really getting at, I think. For what he is really admonishing us against is hypocrisy. Last week he warned against saying we believe in Jesus but not acting as if we do. "Faith without works is dead."
- † But now James warns that even our tongues, our speech may be divided. If we bless the Creator God and then curse someone created in the image of God, we not only say something bad about another human being, we also say something false about God—namely that God creates junk.
- † Do we not affirm that God saw everything that God created and saw that it was good? Our psalm 19 that we read responsively affirms that! One element of our speech sometimes gives lie to the other, and in the end we are not just lying, we are lying about God.
- † So that's why James' judgment is so strict. The warning James gives is especially for those who—by virtue of praying, praising, preaching, or even just talking about God—are teachers of divine things.
- † Today we began a new study for adults, led by faithful student and teacher of the Word, Lynn Nagel. It's based on a book by Adam Hamilton, pastor of the mega-church of the Resurrection, a United

- Methodist Church in Kansas City. The book is called Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White.
- † Adam Hamilton isn't advocating a mushy middle road for faithful Christians, but the modesty of listening. According to one reader, Daniel Clendenin, Hamilton embodies the so-called "peace-saying" of Peter Meiderlin, a Lutheran pastor who had grown tired of the hatred and division caused by doctrinal disputes in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.
 - † Can you believe that in 1620, almost four hundred years ago, people were as nasty towards each other as they are today? Well they were! So Peter Meiderlin wrote a book under the pen name Rupert Meldenius, called A Prayerful Admonition for Peace to the Theologians of the Augsburg Confession.
 - † In this book, he urged "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, adopted this peace saying, and it became a hallmark of his movement. That may have been one reason that Methodism grew so rapidly!
 - † In light of the political and even religious climate in today's world, we could do well to adopt the peace saying as our own. A lot of people have asked me about the popularity of the New York Times bestseller, The Shack. Although the theology in it is somewhat controversial for conservative evangelicals, I think its popularity comes from a sadder source.
 - † The author of The Shack, William P. Young, clearly disdains organized religion, including the church in all its divisions. And of course he has some good reasons for his bias.

- † For me, at least, it's easy to get discouraged. Is the church destined to become like the British Parliament at "question time," with each side threatening to shout out the other? And meanwhile, are those who profess to love Jesus but hate the church going to outnumber those inside the church?
- † Lest we think these are new questions, let's look at the gospel lesson for today. Even Jesus becomes really angry with Peter. And remember Peter is the "rock" upon which the church of Jesus will be built!
- † When Peter rejects Jesus' teaching that the Messiah must be crucified, Peter is practically lying about God. Surely, Peter suggests, there must be an easier way. Do you remember the wonderful book and movie, The Last Temptation of Christ, by Nikos Kazantzakis?
- † I will never forget the haunting scene in which Jesus wrestles with what he ought to do, now that it seems inevitable that he will be arrested. He asks himself, "Why don't I just go back to Nazareth, get married, have a family, take up carpentry again, and get away from all of this that is before me?"
- † In some ways, that question is why Dan Brown's DaVinci Code was so popular. Why couldn't Jesus have just kept on healing people and telling parables and blessing children until, at an advanced age, he died in his sleep? Or aged gracefully as a teacher, spending summers by the lake, sporting a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, and greeting class after class of ever younger, fresh-faced disciples each fall?

- † “Consider the lilies of the field...” he would say, and pens would start scribbling across the pages of notebooks. So asks Mary Hinkle in an old issue of *Christian Century*.
- † Why? Because then his life would have been a lie. He would have missed his whole reason for being, which was to show us the face and nature of God, who pours himself out for the sake of others. Jesus the Christ “came to show us how to live and how to die and how to be free from the excessive self-anxiety that robs human life of meaning. No one ever said that Jesus’ way was the easy way.” (Adams)
- † “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31)
- † But Peter doesn’t agree. There must be an easier way. And Peter is so much like us. We want to control our lives, to defeat the inevitability of death. And why not? But paradoxically, the energy we spend trying to save and secure our lives leads eventually and inevitably to our losing them.
- † “Why does this have to be?” Peter wails. And so do we. But all faith traditions recognize that coming to terms with suffering and death is key to human freedom. The prophet Muhammad said, “Die before you die.”
- † The Sufi mystic Rumi said, “Lose your life, if you seek eternity.” These texts, including Jesus’ words about losing your life to find it, save it—recognize a paradox: that which is precious to us can’t be preserved, but only received in gratitude and offered up to God again and again in our living.

- † Can we begin to learn this, to live this, in our church? And in learning it, can we be gentle with each other? Believe me, I know it isn't easy. I am so grateful to the members of Community United Methodist Church in Bigfork for their willingness to risk discussing the health care reform issue in their church this Thursday. And I hope you will join them and that our church can also be a place where we can learn to risk loss so that we might speak and act consistently with God's forgiving love in our mouths and hearts.
- † As we begin a new program year, I pray that we can teach our children and each other with the "peace saying" as our guide: "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity."
- † And yes, I know, it's hard to agree on what's essential sometimes. But one thing, I believe, is central to Jesus' message. And that is the message of the cross: life's meaning comes from loving as Jesus' loved—without counting the cost and in forgiveness and grace—even in the face of suffering and death.
- † How will we teach our children, each other, and the world about Jesus? Will we teach with our words, our living, our forgiving? Or will we just keep shouting til there's no one left to hear?
- † There are signs of hope—even in the political world. How moving it was for me to hear Senator Orrin Hatch, Republican from Utah, eulogize his friend Senator Ted Kennedy. Their politics couldn't have been more different, and Hatch said, "If someone had told me he (Kennedy) would become one of my best friends, I would have told them they needed therapy."
- † Which reminds me that if someone had told me I'd be quoting Bill O'Reilly from Fox News in a sermon, I would have told them they

also needed therapy. But I will quote him now. “Our modern age presents vast challenges to children,” O’Reilly said, “and they need to learn lessons quickly in order to prosper. And who better to teach them than the President of the United States?”

- † O’Reilly, much to the chagrin of some of his fans, went on to list five lessons that President Obama embodies: forgiveness, respect, persistence, hard work, and possibility.
- † Yes, we teach with our words and our lives—whether we are a cable news anchor, a President, a senator—or, yes, part of our Whitefish United Methodist Church. It’s a daunting task, but aren’t we up to it, with the Spirit’s help? I pray that we are, together. Amen.

Sources:

Joanna Adams, “The Choice of a Lifetime,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Stephen Fowl, “In the Know,” www.religion-online.org

Mary E. Hinkle, “Lesson Plan,” www.religion-online.org