

“A Time to Speak, a Time to Be Silent”

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Poor Peter! From our gospel reading for today it's pretty clear that he had a problem with his tongue. Seems like he really struggled with knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

I mean, there he is with Jesus and the other disciples outside the city of Caesarea Philippi. He'd been traveling with Jesus for a few weeks, maybe months by then. He'd heard Jesus preach and teach about the kingdom of God. He had watched Jesus bring healing to the sick and blind and crippled. He had joined with Jesus in feeding a multitude of thousands with a few fish and a few loaves of bread. He had sailed on a ship with Jesus and observed with his own eyes Jesus take command over a storm and calm the winds that had threatened to sink them. He had seen and heard enough to know what he believed about Jesus.

So when Jesus asked his band of followers who they thought Jesus was, Peter, with a confident, wild-West, “shoot ‘em first and ask questions later” kind of flair, boldly said what all the disciples had been thinking and wanted to say. “You are the Christ!”

If only Peter had left things there. If only speaking what he felt to be true was enough for him. Perhaps he could have basked in the joy and the wonder of being the first person to proclaim the good news. But in four short verses, Peter goes from fresh water to brackish.

Immediately after Peter's declaration of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus describes the fate that is waiting for him in Jerusalem. *The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law. He must be killed and after three days rise again.*

If only Peter would have stepped back for a while, and pondered Jesus' words, and thought about what they might mean for him and for Jesus – maybe things would have gone better. But he didn't. With the same boldness and impetuous flair, Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Matthew and Luke give us some insight into what Peter may have said – things like: *God forbid that any such things would ever happen to you. You are the Son of God for Pete's sake, use your power to destroy your enemies. You have the army of angels at your side, no earthly power can stop you. The world is yours for the conquest – so let's stop this talk about*

suffering and death and get started in forcing the nations of the world into submission. You are the Christ after all, and the kingdom is ours.

And for his intemperate words, Peter received back from Jesus his own tongue lashing. I can feel with Peter the pain he must have felt to have Jesus call him Satan. I can feel the shame and embarrassment Peter experienced to be sent away from Jesus and scolded in front of the other disciples for not having the things of God in his mind, but having the thoughts of men.

Poor Peter. It seems he had a problem with his tongue. Not knowing when to speak. Not knowing when to be silent.

Truth be told, our tongues can get us into a lot of trouble. We speak without thinking how our words might hurt others. We speak without considering the chain of events our words might trigger. We speak without pausing to ask, *Are my words honest? Are they spoken with an honorable intent of doing good? Are my words true?*

I don't know if you've noticed or not, but there have been some stories in the news in the last few

weeks where peoples' lack of control over their tongues has gotten them into considerable trouble. Maybe you heard about the politician in California who had to resign his elected office because he was bragging about having an adulterous affair. Now he claims it isn't true and that he was just joking around with a friend. Too bad he didn't know when to be silent. Or maybe you heard the congressman who interrupted President Obama's speech about health care reform by shouting out that the president was a liar. He's been getting a lot of criticism and unfavorable media attention directed his way simply because he couldn't tame his tongue. And not necessarily about the words he used to express his opinion, but about his timing and the inappropriateness of speaking when he did. And certainly you heard about the running back from the University of Oregon whose taunting words before the start of the game with Boise State eventually led to a physical altercation and his suspension from the team, and resulted in great embarrassment to his coach, his team, and his college. It's just like the writer of the book of James says: *the tongue is a fire... seemingly impossible to tame ... a restless evil ... full of deadly poison.*

There's no way getting around the fact that our tongues are difficult to tame. Our words can hurt.

They can break hearts. They can destroy lives. Can one ever entirely get over being told by her parents that she was unwanted? Or being told by a teacher that he'll never amount to anything? They might, if they are lucky, prove them wrong – but the scars are always there. The memories remain. Can one ever entirely heal from being the victim of gossip and half-true rumors? Even if given an opportunity to speak the truth and set things right again, the shadow of suspicion and doubt often remain. It just might be that the words that come from our mouths say more about us, reveal the truth of our nature and the condition of our hearts, than they say about the person we are talking about.

On the other hand, our tongues are capable of saying incredibly beautiful, wonderfully helpful things. With our words we can lavish praise and express appreciation for the gifts that others bring into our lives. With our words, we can share truths that need to be heard. And even when those truths are hard to hear, they can be helpful and healing when spoken with kindness and gentleness and with concern for the well-being of the listener. With our words we can pass on knowledge that is needed. With our words we can share dreams and visions that are inspiring and challenging. The tongue may be

dangerous and difficult to tame – but think how much poorer our experience of life would be without them.

I'm convinced that the key to taming our tongue is knowing when to speak and when be silent. One of my all time favorite movies is Walt Disney's Bambi. The first time I saw it I was a little boy, but it didn't become one of my favorite movies then. It became a favorite when I was an adult and saw it for the first time with Cindy. I have never seen anyone laugh harder in my life than Cindy laughed in Bambi. And the cause of her laughter was almost always Thumper. If you remember the movie, Thumper was often getting himself in trouble with his mother. And after the incident was over, his mother would always ask him what his father would say. There's one scene in the movie where Thumper is laughing and making fun of Bambi. It may be the skating scene where Bambi is so graceless and awkward and falls on the ice over and over again. Thumper's mother overhears him saying something unkind and ungracious about Bambi's attempts at skating, for which she sternly scolds her son. And when asked what his father would say about the lesson to be learned, Thumper, in his profound but embarrassed way replies ... "If you can't think of anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." We know Thumper's words are true. It's better to stay silent if our words

are not spoken in love, with kindness, for building the other person up, with truth tempered by compassion, with the desire to bring blessings and goodness and life to all.

The use of your tongue – what does it say about you? Does it say that you are a person who needs to put down others in order to feel good about yourself? Does it say that you believe you are better than other people? Does it say that everything has to be your way – that only your needs matter, that only your opinion is of any value? Does it say that only you know what is true and that anyone who has a different idea is ignorant, or evil, or at best, naïve? Does it say that you know the power of words and that you know when the time is right to speak and when the time is right to be silent? Or does it say that you are a person who knows that you are blessed by God and that you want to use your words to bring blessings to others. Knowing that your tongue is a fire ... does it burn people consume people or does it warm them, comfort them, bless and empower them?

Peter's tongue said a lot about him. What does your tongue say about you? Amen.