

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

Jesus silences slander

—Mark 3:20-35

Throughout the ages, people have noticed and remarked about the power of words. We even have adages that attest to the power of words. “The pen is mightier than the sword.” The apostle James wrote about the power of the tongue in his epistle. In chapter three of his epistle, he writes, *“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”* (James 3:3-8).

I’m sure you can relate to what James is saying. Someone has spoken poorly of you or your family, even slanderously. They have spoken behind your back, dripped poison into the ears of someone else. They have gathered an audience who will hear the destructive remarks. You’ve had that happen to you, haven’t you? When something like that happens, how do you respond? I can tell you how I often respond, and often it’s not good. How often can we feel the anger build up inside of us? How often do we want to get even and seek revenge? How often do we want to use our own words to drip poison against those people?

My friends, God is very clear about how he wants us to use our words and how he wants us to react to slanderous words. He wants us to speak words that will build up, not tear down. If we hear words of gossip against someone, our ear is to be the grave of those remarks. He doesn’t want us to respond with vengeance. But as we look at our lives, we see very clearly that we haven’t always done that. We have at times used our words to speak slander against someone else. We have sought revenge against those who have slandered us. So here is my prayer for you today. I pray that you will see how Jesus silences slander in your place. He’s not just giving us an example to follow. He is living his life of perfect obedience in your place.

If there was anybody who should have known that, it was Jesus’ family members. If there was anybody who should have known Jesus as their Lord and God who tirelessly came to serve as the Savior of all, it should have been his family. However, when they heard that Jesus was so busy teaching and healing that he didn’t have time to eat, they told anyone who would listen that Jesus was a lunatic. Mark writes, *“When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’”* (Mark 3:21). Can you believe that? Mary, Jesus’ mother, called him a lunatic, a madman? How can that be?

Well, perhaps that’s not too surprising when we consider how we have often thought about Jesus as a madman, too, right? Oh, maybe you haven’t said it with words, but have you ever thought it? “Um, Jesus, you want 10%, 20% of my income in offerings? Really? Um, Jesus, you want me to gather with fellow believers *every week* to worship you and encourage them? Really? Um, Jesus, you want me to spend even more than one hour studying your Word in Bible study? Really? Um, Jesus, you want me to honor my parents who are so uncool? Jesus, you want me to keep my body for my spouse alone? Really, Jesus? You have got to be out of your mind!” Have we ever wanted to “take charge of Jesus”? “Come on, Jesus. What you are asking of me is way too much! You can’t expect me to live 100% of my life for you.” I can’t speak for you, but I can look at my own life. I have been in a similar situation as Jesus’ family. Maybe I haven’t said it out loud, but I’ve thought it. “I need to take charge of Jesus because he is out of his mind with what he is telling me.”

But notice that Jesus doesn’t give in. He is not some lunatic that is out of his mind. He knows what is best for people. When told that his family was outside the house waiting for him, Jesus said, *“Who are my mother and my brothers?”* (Mark 3:33). He then looked at the people around him and said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother”* (Mark 3:34,35).

Now I think there are some important things for us to see here. Jesus is not putting down his family. He’s not slandering them in retaliation. No. He is holding up a more important relationship that comes when we believe in him as our Savior. Jesus’ family are those who do God’s will. Well, what is God’s will? God’s will is that sinners would turn from their sin to Jesus as the Savior. God’s will is that we repent of our sins and put our faith in Jesus for salvation. And isn’t that what we do? By my life and attitude, I have slandered Jesus’ name. I have said that he is “out of his mind” for wanting me to live my life for him. That is sin. But God the Holy Spirit has led us to see that Jesus is the only one who can rescue us from those sins. God the Holy Spirit leads us to repent.

Those are the people Jesus considers as his own flesh and blood. Jesus wanted all the people who had come into that house to be close to him. He wanted that for his mother and brothers who were waiting outside to take him home and put some sense back into him. Even though his family spoke slander against him, Jesus led them to repent. We know that’s true as we look at his family members later in life.

Later we discover that Jesus' brother James becomes a great leader in the early church. God inspired him to write the epistle that we are studying in our Sunday morning Bible study. And his mother? Well, we know how faithful his mother Mary was to him as he was dying on the cross. As she stood at the foot of the cross, looking up at Jesus, she didn't look at him as a lunatic. She saw him as her Lord, her Savior. Jesus silenced slander by teaching God's will.

But now let's look at the unfair criticism and slander that comes to Jesus from his enemies. The teachers of the law made this outrageous claim about Jesus: *"He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."* (Mark 3:22). Beelzebub means "Lord of the flies." It was a very derogatory name for Satan. They link Jesus up to the Lord of the flies. Understand some context here. As Jesus started his ministry, he was constantly battling against Satan and his demons. He was regularly casting demons out of people who were under his control. He showed his power and authority over the demonic forces. And that terrified the religious leaders. They didn't know what to make of Jesus' ministry, so they slanderously attacked him.

How does Jesus handle this unfair criticism? Well, he does not start attacking them. That's how we might react. Instead, he patiently points out to them why their criticism cannot be true. "How can Satan drive out Satan?" Satan would never drive his evil spirits from people with the kind of destructive power that Jesus displayed. Then he would be a kingdom divided against itself and a house divided against itself. Why would Satan give Jesus the power to destroy himself and his evil spirits?

Jesus also compares his coming to this world to a man tying up a strong man and robbing his house. Jesus came to rob Satan of his power, to crush his head. Jesus came to enter Satan's house, so to speak, and to bind him up so that he could rescue you and me. Jesus isn't aligned with Satan; he came to destroy him. Jesus did that, not just by casting out demons, but by preaching the truth of God's Word and pointing out man's inability to save himself. Jesus wanted to be very clear. He did not want confusion to creep in the hearts of his hearers. His primary mission is to seek and to save the lost. His message of salvation was centered on who he was as the Son of God who took on flesh to be the Savior of the world. He didn't want anybody to miss that.

So these words that the religious leaders spoke were very slanderous. But in love Jesus speaks a strong warning to those who made those comments. Even though his enemies slandered him, Jesus loved them so much that he gave a focused warning. He warns them about the danger they are in with these words, *"I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. He is guilty of eternal sin"* (Mark 3:28,29). Jesus said that if the religious leaders continued to willfully reject his witness and all the miracles he had done, and if they continued to call his activities "satanic," they would become guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit for which there is no forgiveness.

"But wait a second, pastor, I thought *all* sins are forgivable, and in fact forgiven? What's Jesus talking about here?" Yes, Jesus died and paid for every sin. However, we only receive the benefit of that forgiveness when we trust in Jesus, when we have faith in Jesus. It's the Holy Spirit's job to bring us to such faith. So, if we keep rejecting him, we'll never come to faith and never benefit from the forgiveness that Jesus won for us. The Holy Spirit wants to connect us to Christ. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel in Word and Sacrament to lead us to repentance. He leads us to see our sin and to believe that Jesus has freely and fully forgiven those sins. If we resist the work of the Holy Spirit, it is a sin that refuses the very means by which we receive forgiveness that is freely offered to us by Jesus. There is only one sin that can actually condemn someone to hell: unbelief.

Think of it like this. If you are dying of thirst in the desert, and I leave a gallon of water with you, how foolish you would be to reject the water and say, "I will survive by swallowing my own spit." Right? That's also the nature of the sin against the Holy Spirit. People sin against the Holy Spirit when they stubbornly refuse to receive what the Holy Spirit offers them as a free gift in Jesus.

So Jesus silences slander with the sword of the Spirit. And there is an important application for us, a warning, if you will. Whenever we ignore God's Word or even just treat it with a bored indifference, we're telling the Holy Spirit to buzz off as if he's a bothersome fly. But if he does that, we will lose our faith. And without faith in Jesus, there is no salvation, only a fearful expectation of eternal wrath. But by God's grace, my friends, the Holy Spirit is at work among us today. Today we come hungry and thirsty for the forgiveness we have in Jesus. We confess we have slandered other people and have been sinfully angry when we were slandered unfairly. And the Holy Spirit leads us to rejoice in what Jesus has done for us. He silences slander, not for his own sake, but for your sake. He directs us back to the will of our Father: to repent and believe that we have forgiveness in Jesus. He shows us what we really need: God's Word.

Words are powerful. God's Word is powerful. I pray that the Holy Spirit will give us a desire to stay connected to that Word. May we sing with the hymn writer: *Oh, that the Lord would guide my ways To keep his statutes still! Oh, that my God would grant me grace To know and do his will!* (Christian Worship Hymnal 462:1). Amen.