

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19) – Year B – September 16, 2009 - Homily
Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38
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Catalysts are used in chemical reactions to either increase or slow down the rate of the reaction. The catalyst is not consumed or altered in the reaction between two or more substances, even though the substances themselves are changed. That means that in many cases, the catalyst can be used repeatedly, like the catalytic converters in our cars. Our tongues are also a bit like catalysts – especially the part about being used repeatedly! They are also like catalysts because they can slow down a reaction, when we are calm in the face of anger or frustration, where we refuse to spread gossip, for example. Unfortunately, the tongue can also speed up a reaction. We all know how arguments escalate and words are spoken quickly and without much thought, and before we realize it, we have caused great pain and damage with what was said.

The letter of James has a significant amount to say about the tongue and not much of it is good! The writer of James makes his point using a variety of images and analogies. There's a little irony in using so many words, so playfully and skillfully, to warn us about the dangers of careless speech. I once heard that a bite from a human could be much more serious than a dog bite because dogs have much cleaner mouths than humans do. I don't know if it's true or not, but reading James we might come to believe it based on his description of our tongues. According to James' letter, our tongues are small but can be as dangerous as fire, big on boasting, a restless evil, full of deadly poison, and able to bless and curse. So many accusations! Such honesty! You and I talk of situations that leave a bad taste in our mouths and I wonder how many times that is because harsh words have been exchanged, or when our words have not honored God.

As we learned a couple of weeks ago, the first chapter of James' letter introduces three marks of true religion. Right speech is one them, and the others are God's justice in caring for our neighbors, especially the poor and marginalized, and keeping ourselves unstained from the world. Tonight's portion of James comes back to the traditional Jewish thought about humanity's dual capacity for righteousness and for wickedness. It was thought that a righteous life holds evil in check in order that the good will be evident in our deeds of justice and love. It brings to mind the traditional Cherokee story of the two wolves. The story goes like this, an elder Cherokee was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, ... greed, arrogance, self-pity, ... resentment, ... lies, [and] false pride.... The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, ... humility, kindness, ... friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too." The children thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed." One might say that the wolf is often at the door – the question is which wolf. The Gospels tell us how often Jesus had to point out our shortcomings on how well we do in resisting evil in order to do good. History tells its own horror story on that score as well. Our track record as Christians is no less sullied; plenty of bad things have been done in the name of Christ. The warning in the letter of James is quite justified: we often fan the flames of anger and unrest with our words, instead of dousing them. Sadly, and much too often, we are positive catalysts accelerating the restless evil that roams the world. In other words, we seem to feed the wrong wolf much too often.

The good news is that despite our natural inclinations, there is a solution to the problem of our double-mindedness and our dichotomous nature. James exhorts each follower of Christ to put

our faith into action with integrity. When star athletes make their craft look so easy, we tend to admire what seems to be a brimming natural ability. What we don't see in the sixty or ninety minutes of a game, are the hours and hours of grueling practice that have helped each to reach this star-status level. The same applies to other gifts that require us to practice in order to gain in competence and expertise, like musicians, artists and writers, for example. What James is trying to tell us is that our spiritual lives also fall into this category. Most of us, me included, don't have great natural abilities in spiritual matters. If we think about that, it is actually a good thing, because we would have no impetus to seek and develop our relationship with God and Jesus if we did. It would give us a false sense of pride in our own resources. So since there is a yawning gap in our innate spiritual abilities, God calls us to practice our faith diligently.

What then are the spiritual catalysts that help us to focus our hearts and minds on loving God and our neighbor, and developing our spiritual gifts? Bishop and author, Jeremy Taylor, has one suggestion, saying, "Meditation is the tongue of the soul and the language of our spirit." President Calvin Coolidge has another, "It is only when men [and women] begin to worship [God] that they begin to grow". Prayer and meditation are important in enlarging our spiritual capacity and aptitude. Worshipping the Lord continues the blessing of transformation that we receive through the power of the Holy Spirit at baptism. As a whole, all the spiritual disciplines are analogous to feeding the good wolf within. They are also the ways that help us to right speech for the glory of God's name. James says, "Not many of you should become teachers." Yet on reflection, we are all teachers. When we use our gift of speech rightly to the glory of God's name, it is like being a catalyst for positive change in the world. We share God's love, joy and peace, calming the tempests of misunderstanding and anger, as we put our faith into action through righteous deeds, doing the work that God has called us to do. Everything we say and do matters, because it is a model and lesson in Christ for our loved ones, friends, and neighbors. You and I are filled with the clear, refreshing water of life, flowing from Christ, the source of all life. May the Lord help us all to grow in righteous speech, so that our words will be as gracious and welcome as an oasis of life-giving water in the desert of a thirsty world.

Amen.