



Sticks & Stones



A Sermon By
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The Third Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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April 1, 2018
Mark 3:20-35

When I was in elementary school, I was always very tall for my age. Every time I would go for my annual physical, the doctor would say, “You’re in the 99th percentile for height,” which I took as a sign of affirmation, something to take pride in, but for my mother, my height was always a source of consternation, because I was constantly outgrowing my clothes.

At the beginning of every new school year, my mother would buy me a few new shirts and pants, outfits that were supposed for several months, at least until the weather changed, but usually, the clothes only fit for a few weeks. This meant I was constantly walking around in clothes that were too small: my short sleeve shirts barely covered my shoulders; my long sleeve shirts were well short of my wrists; and my pants were always a few inches above by ankles, revealing my white cotton socks and white Chuck Taylor All-Stars. Keep in mind this was at a time when the height of fashion included bellbottoms, and wide stripes in all sorts of colors. Just imagine the worst possible clothes combinations from the Brady Bunch, or the Partridge Family, or That 70s Show, and you’ll get a sense of what I looked like – it wasn’t pretty.

As you can imagine, a tall, skinny, gangly kid with that sort of appearance was the target of a lot of teasing. I remember getting off the school bus one beautiful spring day, and as I started walking down the street towards home, the kids at the back of the bus stuck their heads out the windows:

“Hey Andrew, where’s the flood?”

“Yeah Andrew, nice floods! Tell your Mom to buy pants that fit!”

I know that doesn’t sound bad by today’s standard of putdowns; but, back in elementary school, my friends and I used to tease people whose pants were too short, calling them “floods;” and, it was just about the worst insult we had for people. “Look at her floods! Look at his floods!” we would say.

But now, my friends were turning those jokes on me. The friends I was just sitting with, the friends I was just laughing with, were teasing me, laughing at me. It was like they were in, and I was out. And, it hurt. To this day, I still remember the hurt.

I suppose that’s why my Mother always told me, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it.”

I think she may have been channeling the Book of Psalms, where it’s written: *Keep your tongue from evil.*¹

Or, maybe it was Shakespeare: *Mind your speech a little, lest you may mar your fortunes.*²

Or, it could have been Benjamin Franklin: Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.

Either way, the point my Mother was trying to make was: words are powerful. They can hurt, and demean, and belittle, and therefore, we have to be careful with what we say. What we think is funny or inconsequential, may not be taken that way, and so we should choose our words carefully, because once they’re said, we can’t take them back, and they may not be forgotten.

¹ Psalm 34:13

² King Lear

We all know that, of course. We know that Shakespeare, and Franklin, and my Mother were all right, because, at one time or another, we've all been called names ourselves. It may have been because of the way we look or the way we dress, the way we speak, or what we believe, or where we come from... it could have been for any number of things. But, whatever it was, people put us down for being who we are.

At the time, others probably tried to be helpful and supportive, saying something like, "It's alright. Don't worry about it. Just ignore them. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." And yet, that advice felt kind of empty and hollow. It was hard to ignore what people were saying. It was hard not to worry about it, because words do hurt, sometimes they hurt a lot, affecting the rest of our lives as we can carry that pain with us.

It's ironic, then, that we call people names ourselves. Even though we know the hurt and pain it can cause, we tease and taunt, we ridicule and mock. Usually, it's toward someone we don't like, or someone with whom we disagree, someone who works at our company, someone who works in politics.

We probably don't say anything to the person's face. We probably talk about them behind their back, or we just think about it, insulting them and labeling them in our own minds, or maybe we write something in an email, or post it on social media. But, we *do* do it, all of us; just like those kids on the bus, we put other people down.

Psychologists give several different reasons for why we act this way. We could be motivated by anger, responding to perceived slights from someone else, and so, we lash out at that person, trying to put them in their place. Or, we could be trying to look cool and fit in. Insulting someone else can be a quick way to make friends build a sense of camaraderie. Or, it could be that we are trying to distract the other person from the issue at hand. If you and I have different opinions on some subject, but I struggle to support my opinion with reason or facts, I can call you names as a distraction and a way to throw you off your game.

The bottom line is: we belittle other people to make ourselves feel better. If I can put you down, it feels like I've lifted myself up. If I can knock you down the social hierarchy, it's like I have moved up the social hierarchy. And so, in order to claim more status for myself, to feel like I'm important and have some real gravitas, I question other people's status, calling them stupid or crazy, denigrating their ancestry, their culture, their religion, you name it...

We see all of these dynamics at play in today's Gospel reading. It was not long after Jesus began his public ministry; but, already, his fame had spread throughout the region, reaching all the way to Jerusalem; and, this opened Jesus up to criticism, and innuendo, and name calling, particularly from the religious authorities back in Jerusalem, who were concerned Jesus was getting too much attention:

"He has gone of out his mind," the people said.

"He's possessed by Satan," the scribes said. "And, by the power of demons, he casts out demons."

This was their way of putting Jesus in his place, labeling him as a messenger of the devil rather than of God, and hopefully, publically humiliating and discrediting Jesus, so much so he would pack it all in and go back from where he came.

And, for a moment, it seemed to be working. Jesus' family heard the slander and came out to restrain him. They didn't want the situation to get any worse. It was possible Jesus would try to retaliate against those who were slandering him, saying something mean and nasty, something he might regret, something that might even embarrass the family and bring shame upon them.

Of course, Jesus' family members had nothing to worry about. That's not who Jesus was. He wasn't the kind of person who had to get back at someone, tit for tat. Jesus did ridicule what other the people were saying, rebuffing all of their name calling by pointing out the illogic of what they said, but he didn't ridicule those who were saying it, because Jesus wasn't out of his mind; he wasn't crazy; and, he wasn't possessed by demons. Jesus was simply full of God's love. He had the mind of God and the Spirit of God. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" he asked. "How can a house divided stand?"

Sadly, that same generosity of spirit toward others, even others with whom we disagree or may not care for very much, seems to missing from the world these days. Over the last several months, we have seen a lot of ridiculing and name-calling, on television, in the newspapers, and especially on Twitter. It's amazing how much hurt, and pain and damage can be caused with no more than 140 characters, but then again, words are powerful.

Today, Jesus reminds us that to be part of his family we have to do the will of God. We have to be of the same mind, and same Spirit as Jesus himself, and that means our words should embody his love. That may seem crazy in a world like ours, and people may say we've gone out of our minds. But, that only puts us in good company, and right where we belong.

Amen.