

WHO DO YOU SAY?

Sermon by Linda Motter

Damascus United Methodist Church

Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost – September 13, 2009

A native American, Takoda, was walking in downtown New York City with his friend, Mike, who lived there. All of a sudden, Takoda said, “I hear a cricket.” To which Mike replied, “You’re crazy!” “No, I hear a cricket. I’m sure of it.”

“Look Takoda, it’s noon in NYC, there’s people walking around, cars honking, taxis racing- its full of city noises. I’m sure you can’t hear a cricket!”

“I’m sure I do.” Takoda listened closely, walked to the corner, crossed the street and looked all around. Finally, he found a bush in a large cement planter. He lifted up a leaf and found the cricket.

Mike was amazed. Then Takoda said, “My ears are no different than yours. It simply depends on what you are listening for. Here, let me show you.” Takoda reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change – a few quarters, some dimes, nickels and pennies. And he dropped it on the concrete.

Every head within the block turned. “You see what I mean?” Takoda said as he began picking up his coins. “It all depends on what you are listening for.” (Hansel, 125)

That is a true story. Yes, it all depends on what we’re listening for and what we’re tuned in to. Every moment of every day, **we are surrounded by God’s creation.** What is creation revealing? God, in God’s infinite Wisdom, created everything- the heavens, the earth, and the creatures - including you and me. Psalm 19:1 (that we just read in the Psalter) says this: *the heavens are telling the glory of God.* In addition, the earth which includes the trees, the ocean, and dazzling sunsets are also communicating God’s glory. When we consider it, **all of creation** is a testimony to God. Everything created is a pointer that uncovers and reveals God. So, as a creature made in the image of God, that includes you and me. As part of God’s creation, our lives are meant to uncover and reveal God. So, **What am I communicating about God in what I say and how I live?**

Let’s first explore what humans say. According to statisticians, the average person spends at least one fifth of his or her life talking. A 50-page book can be filled with the words said in just one day. In one year's time the average person's words would fill 52,800 pages. And for some of us, it would be even more. That is a lot of talking! So although the physical size of the tongue is small, its power cannot be overestimated.

In James 3:10, it says, “*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so.*” James tells us we shouldn't have both blessing and cursing from the same place--but that doesn't mean we should stop talking. Instead, we should remember that what we say is powerful, and so we should be careful not to be hurtful

or negative. What we say can be used for good- tell a little girl what her kindness meant to you, let a teenage boy know how much you liked his singing, thank a volunteer for hard work. Because sometimes, the impact of what we say has lasting consequences.

A woman went to St. Francis of Assisi and asked what she had to do to be forgiven for her gossiping. St. Francis told her to take feathers and to place one at each doorstep of every person she had gossiped about in town. She did so, and returned to St. Francis. Next, St. Francis told her to go and retrieve all of the feathers. When she tried to do this, they were all gone. The feathers had scattered all around town. Once again, she returned to St. Francis and told him about the feathers. St. Francis said, “You wish to repent and be forgiven of your sin. Good. But the damage of your words is done and can not be taken back.”

What we say and how we say it reveals what we believe and whom we worship. Either we fall into words of the world filled with meanness and hate or we honor God with words of love, mercy and grace. To help us with this, maybe we could say the psalmist's prayer from Psalm 19:14 on a regular basis. Imagine if every day when we awaken, we say it even before we speak a single word. And as the day goes on, we could say it again before conversations with others. What if we got into the habit of asking God's help by saying: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Maybe Peter knew these words from the Psalmist. When Peter was asked by Jesus, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Peter answered him, “*You are the Messiah.*” Messiah is Hebrew and means *the anointed one*. That was a powerful answer and one Jesus knew would reveal his identity.

Today, if asked, “*Who do you say that I am?*” we might answer *Jesus Christ*. This name is full of meaning. *Jesus* is a proper name (like Mary or Sam), and it's transliterated from the Hebrew name *Yeshua* which means *the Lord saves*. *Christ* is a Greek title (a title for me- dental hygienist). *Christ* means *the anointed one*. Also remember, what language is *Messiah?* (Hebrew) It means? (*the anointed one*) So in the name *Jesus Christ*, Hebrew and Gentile names are combined. This shows that God's salvation that was offered to Israel is not just for Israel, but for Gentiles, too. The name *Jesus Christ* describes the real meaning behind God's purpose in becoming human. God is directly connecting with humankind to save us by Jesus Christ, the one God divinely brought about because of love. So when we answer Jesus' question “So who do you say I am?” we're agreeing with Peter. But still remember, how we reveal God in our lives is not only in what we say, but in what we do.

So, if I believe that God has revealed God's self as love through Jesus Christ, what am I reflecting and pointing to through my life? Is it the model of living that Jesus Christ offered each one of us? Am I modeling a life of love of enemy, of turning the other cheek, of loving God and loving neighbor as self? Thankfully in our lives, this is not where people with the strongest determination come out on top. We have an advocate, a friend, the Holy Spirit- who encourages us when we can't do it on our own. The Holy Spirit works in our lives through Jesus Christ's example to us, through Scripture and all proclamations of God

through sermons, hymns, prayers, puppets, creation, through it all. Yes, when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes, we realize we are surrounded by God's revealing of God's self as love. These reminders encourage us to boldly continue in our faith journeys by proclaiming God's love. Since each of us is created differently, this proclamation happens in different ways.

Our stewardship of God's creation reflects our praise to God. This happens when we make wise energy usage decisions like drying our clothes on the line, when we recycle, when we choose the higher miles per gallon or hybrid car to drive to decrease our carbon footprint. Even our ability to give away what is not needed and to simply live with enough reveals God. All of these actions connect us to the deeper wisdom of our Christian tradition and creation. But, this is only the beginning of how we can live to reflect God's glory.

When Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus knows something different about the meaning of Messiah and he calls his followers into that place of humility. Jesus knows that it is not in power but in weakness, that it is not in greatness but in smallness that the kingdom of God is revealed. Peter had trouble with Jesus' proclamation. If we're honest, we do to. We have difficulty understanding why we have to take up our cross and lose our lives if we are going to find them.

But remember that Jesus' way of live offers signs of God's kingdom arriving (not yet in its fullness) through Jesus' healings, wonders and miracles. Jesus seeks out the marginalized and offers God's grace by forgiving and healing. Jesus calls us to a new way of life that connects the way we live with the kingdom of God. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 offers us examples of how to do this with "*Bless those who curse you*" and "*Love your enemies.*" Jesus encourages us to live a life that turns upside-down what society says. Jesus calls us to downward mobility instead of society's upward mobility call. Jesus reminds us to trust in God when other people are not caring or loving. Jesus the Christ liberates us by coming into the world and showing us a different way of life, one that does not give in to the damaging influences of power and materialism that try to control us. Jesus' life shows us how we can freely choose to reflect God's glory.

God chose to be in intimate relationship with humankind, by giving us a human example to listen to, to follow and connect with, on human terms in Jesus Christ. This is revelation on a plate for humankind, and one that allows us to understand God in ways that we can better relate to. Remember that Jesus lived his life while **preaching the kingdom of God and living for others**. For Jesus, the gospel was **a way of life**. What is it for us?

So, Jesus asks, "*Who do you say that I am?*" Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, as maybe most of us would agree. Its easy to give this answer with our mouths, but much more difficult is the answer that we live. Our lives will either confirm or deny what we have said. What we do as we live every day is our real answer to Jesus' question. Amen.