

“Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger,” James (of the epistle) cautions. “For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature . . . has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue”

No one can tame the tongue. I learned something about that the hard way in middle school. I was always such a good girl in school. But for some reason that year, I began whispering during prayers, and I kept getting caught. I got so many demerits I finally had to stay after school for detention. I just couldn't tame my tongue. Of course, it wasn't really my tongue's fault, but whatever it was in me that kept it wagging.

What comes out of our own mouths can surprise and shock even ourselves. *Did I just say that?!*

Harsh words blurted out in anger.

Teasing words that sting and embarrass.

Threatening words that aim to control by force or fear.

We know how it feels when other people say sharp words to us, too. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me*, we say. We teach our children to say it, hoping it will be a shield to keep them from being hurt. But most of us have to work at not letting words hurt us—gossip, teasing, threats, insults. We care about what other people think and say about us.

We've seen and heard a lot of sharp, angry words this summer. People shouting out at town hall meetings about health care reform. People in the grip of powerful feelings, anger and fear, hurling insults, making any real discussion or debate impossible.

And just the other night, a member of Congress shocked everybody, maybe even himself, when he shouted, “You lie!” during the President's speech. People in the House chamber and watching at home gasped. Republicans and Democrats were deeply offended by the insult to the office of the Presidency. The next day by way of explanation, the congressman said, My “emotions got the best of me.”

The congressman hadn't planned to shout at the President; the words just came out. How do we move forward after so shocking and public an insult? Does there have to be a public apology? People are still talking and writing about that, and what might come of this that could help all of us be more respectful in our speech.

Words seemed to just pop out of Peter's mouth in today's Gospel, with mixed results. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked the disciples. And all of a sudden there it was, on Peter's lips, "You are the Messiah." The Christ. The one anointed by God.

It was not planned, not something Peter had just been waiting for a chance to say. It was spontaneous, a flash of insight, with plenty of evidence to back it up, that just came into focus in that moment. Everything now made sense: the miracles—healing, casting out demons, commanding the wind to cease, walking across the water, feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread and a few fish, bringing a dead child back to life—the teaching, with authority; the forgiving of sin.

"You are the Messiah," the Christ, the Anointed One. This is the first, and only, time a person says this in Mark.

The opening words in the Gospel according to Mark are: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (Messiah/Anointed), the Son of God." (1:1) After his baptism by John, Jesus saw "the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him"—anointing him. And he heard a voice from heaven, "'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (1:10-11)

But Peter is the only person in Mark to say this: "'You are the Messiah.'" . . .

Until the trial before the religious authorities, when the high priest will ask Jesus, "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus will say, "I am." The high priest will tear his clothes, an action of mourning, because he hears Jesus' calm admission as the greatest possible affront to God. Then, it will be a scandal, a great offense; a shocking, impossible thing to say. For the religious authorities, it will be a matter of deep shame that such words could be spoken, and in the house of the high priest himself.

But here, now, when Jesus is with his disciples, surely this is a great moment. Surely Peter will be praised, congratulated. He has hit the target with his answer, a sign that the disciples are finally beginning to understand.

But maybe not, or maybe only the outer ring of the target, because Jesus' reaction is curious, even harsh. Peter doesn't get even a pat on the back, but this, instead: Jesus "sternly ordered" Peter and the other disciples "not to tell anyone about him."

"Sternly ordered." Mark uses a strong word to describe how Jesus spoke to them, a word that is even stronger in the Greek. Mark will use the same word twice more here in this passage; then it will be translated "rebuke," that is scold, chew out. There is something dangerous in what is opened up by what Peter has just said.

Immediately Jesus began to teach them what lay ahead: he would suffer, be rejected, be killed, and after three days rise again. "He said all this quite openly." And, I daresay, calmly and matter of factly.

God had been telling us for a very, very long time, even then:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways,
says the Lord. Isaiah 55:8

Jesus was saying this again, to the disciples. *Do not go around telling people I am the Messiah," not until you understand what that means. Because it is not what you might have hoped, and you must understand.*

Jesus was anointed by God. The kings of ancient Israel were anointed. But Jesus was not anointed to become a conquering warrior king like King David of old. Not even close. He was anointed to confront and overcome everything that leads us into hatred, violence and greed. He would do this not by overwhelming power of violence, but by becoming an offense and a scandal himself, to show the whole world what an unspeakable insult and scandal our human ways of arrogance, indifference and cruelty are to God. And, unimaginably, and, finally, gloriously, to heal and redeem the offense of the whole world in the gift of himself.

Even the first hints of that were deeply scandalous, shocking to Peter. The mere mention of Jesus' suffering and being killed was so shameful that

Peter immediately took Jesus aside and rebuked him. *La la la la la la la, I will not hear you, Jesus. I “beat you back,” (the literal meaning of “rebuke”). I mean to shut you up. As if to say, You lie.*

Peter began to tell Jesus off, to tell Jesus what is acceptable. Shocking. Scandalous. It just burst out of him, set off by his fear, terror, disillusionment, denial. As if Peter, or any human being could know better what is God’s mysterious purpose.

Just as quickly, Jesus cut Peter off—rebuked him. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Sharp words, to wake Peter up, like cold water thrown in his face,

“Satan.” Not a cartoon character with horns and a tail. Tempter, Accuser, Adversary. Tempting Jesus to stop being who he was anointed by God to be, to stop doing what he was anointed to do—just as Satan had tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Accusing Jesus of being wrong about who he was and what he was to do, intent on breaking him down and breaking down his trust in God..

“Get behind me,” Jesus ordered. *You are out of line, a danger to yourself and others. Get back where you belong, following behind me.*

To Follow behind him.

To set my mind on divine things, not on human things.

To not be part of things that are hurtful to other people or any part of creation, because these things are a great insult, offense to God.

How do these things come up in your life and in mine? They come up all the time, in big ways and small. Often they have to do with taming the tongue, or not.

“Let them deny themselves,” Jesus said.

Deny myself the satisfaction of hurting somebody back who hurt me, or of hurting her first so she won’t hurt me.

Deny myself the thrill of being popular, becoming part of the “A” group, looking down on everybody else, gossiping, spreading rumors about other people to feel powerful myself.

“Let them . . . take up their cross and follow me,” Jesus said.
NOT, as has sometimes been taught, let yourself be abused, NOT
submit to domestic violence as your cross to bear. And not the
inevitable hard things that are part of every live to one degree or
another.

Take up your cross. Risk being known as his follower.

As someone who tells the truth.

Does not talk behind other people’s backs.

Risk the looks you will get, the sharp words people will say to you or
behind your back, if

you won’t gossip or make fun of other people

you don’t hit back, with words, sticks or stones

if you are kind, even friends with somebody who is “different,”

not liked, not popular

if you practice taming your tongue.

This is not an easy way. We all want to be liked, and to feel safe,
secure.

But there is One who suffered sticks and stones, and the cruelest
words, and broke their power over him and the whole world—not by giving
back as good as he got, but by giving himself. He is the one, Jesus, the
Christ, who gives himself to us here, in Word, in Bread and Wine, in
community. He is the one who is our help, and is our forgiveness when we
fall away.

He is the one who is with us in every hail of sticks or stones or cruel
words—Jesus the Christ, our Strength and our Redeemer.