

**Proper 17B 2018**  
**Sunday, September 2, 2018**  
**The Very Rev. Tracey Lind**  
**Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA**  
**Psalm 15 • James 1:17-27 • Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

Last week our preacher Robert Taylor spoke about “a crisis of being among us.” He said, “We see it in the race to the bottom of dismissing, demonizing and dehumanizing one another and in the process disrespecting our own humanity.”

I’ve thought about the phrase “crisis of being” all week long. In fact, it’s been the subject of a few dinner table conversations. As I said to Robert, while I’m not sure we’re facing “a crisis of being.” However, I’m fairly certain there is a crisis of civility, decency, compassion, respect, and honor among us.

This crisis is evidenced in the “me too” movement, the president’s daily twitter feed, the political fight over immigration and the inhumane separation of families. We witness it in urban gang warfare, our judicial system and prison life. It is apparent in the dismantling of environmental protection laws and the slingshots between heads of nations. It’s a reality in classroom, playground, bedroom and workplace bullying. And it’s on public display in various NIMBY (not in my backyard) issues.

We seem to have lost (or misplaced) our sense of civility, decency, compassion, respect and honor. And more often than not, this crisis is undergirded by so-called “religious beliefs.” I can’t bake your wedding cake or issue your marriage license. I can’t welcome those people into my club, church, neighborhood or country. I can’t acknowledge climate change. I can’t support gun control legislation, reproductive choice, or the right to die with dignity. These so called “religious beliefs” are informed by various interpretations of the Bible and the Constitution, deeply held personal convictions, inherited biases, misinformation, the news media, and political party loyalty.

Today's scripture passages bring this crisis to light and frame it around the question: what is true religion and how is it reflected in the way we speak and act?

The psalmist asks and answers the question this way:

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?  
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
who do not slander with their tongue.  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.

God wants us to speak from the heart without insult, disparagement, deception, self-centeredness, blame and shame.

In response to the psalmist's question, the author of James answers: If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

In other words, it's not good enough to be hearers or speakers of God's word; the Word has to be put into action, like caring for the young, the elderly and those in distress and despair. James reminds us of the importance of protecting the vulnerable, rather than attacking them, or simply being silent as they are attacked and scapegoated by others. James also insists that we learn to rein in our words, if they do not promote peace, justice and well-being for all God's creatures. And if we've missed the point of these sacred texts, Jesus clarifies them in his teaching: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." They say they love the God whom they can't see, but they sure don't love the neighbor standing right next to them.

Nowadays, accusation, finger-pointing, backstabbing, scapegoating, slander, and deception are acceptable in both public and private life. But, as scripture reminds us, these behaviors are not acceptable to God. The problem is that we are often too timid to confront and name it.

Earlier in the summer, I was having lunch with a friend and she remarked, that somebody had “Jewed her down” in a business transaction. I was appalled. I hadn’t heard that phrase in years, maybe decades. Without hesitating, I responded with alarm: “You can’t say that.” “Why?” she asked, “It’s true.” After composing myself, I explained that such a remark was offensive and anti-Semitic. She shrugged her shoulders, and the conversation moved on. Did she understand the impact of what she said, and why I was offended? Will my response help bridle her tongue in future situations? Will this interaction affect our friendship? I’m not going to write her out of my life, and I hope she doesn’t do that to me because she’s a dear friend. Ultimately, time will tell. But, it was important that I didn’t let this hurtful remark pass, and I pray that she won’t use it again.

Conversations like that happen all the time. At one of the several dinner table conversations last week about Robert’s phrase “crisis of being,” Jack Smith suggested a wise, gentle and faithful approach to such a situation. He spoke of sitting with neighbors in front of the liquor store on Main Street in Wellfleet most evenings. Once in a while, one of them will make a cruel and inconsiderate remark. Jack responds: “I know you, and you are better than that.”

I think Jack’s remark - “I know you, and you are better than that” - might be the best response to our current crisis of civility, decency, compassion, respect, and honor. I can imagine God sitting on a throne in heaven watching our behavior and our interactions with one another and saying, “O my people, I know you. You are better than that.” I can hear God saying: “I wish you would bridle your tongues and start treating each other as brothers and sisters in my name. This is why I created you, and this is what I want for you.”

It's really very simple. God wants us to treat each other with decency and respect, and that means paying attention to how we speak to and of one another.

When I was a little girl and complained that someone had said something mean about me, my grandmother would reply: "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you." However, if I said something unkind about someone else, she would remind me that, "Words once spoken are like eggs once broken; they can never be repaired."

Like my grandmother's gracious wisdom, this morning's scripture readings are an admonishment and reminder of the power of language. The tongue is a small part of the body, but think of the good or damage we can do with the spoken word.

James points out to us that especially vile are words maliciously spoken. Over the course of history, malicious words, gossip, slander, contempt, and perjury have ruined way too many lives. Thus, James writes of the tongue as "a restless evil, full of deadly poison," (James 3:8) and we are cautioned to be careful with its power.

Even Jesus warned his followers about the power of speech. When challenged about ceremonial purity, Jesus responded, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." (Mark 7:15)

Through his own actions, Jesus teaches that keeping our mouth shut is often the way to walk humbly with our God. Silence can be a powerful weapon in nonviolent resistance to oppression. As I reflect on the life of Senator John McCain, many of whose political positions and choices I did not agree with, I can't help but admire this hero who bore captivity, interrogation, and torture in silence, thus frustrating his captors and inspiring his fellow prisoners.

The bridge between too much talk and utter silence is listening. The first command of St. Benedict at the very beginning of the Rule is this: "Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart." Only one who has learned how to listen will be able to hear the cry of others, as well as the call of God.

Speech is also an essential ingredient in life. In fact, as Jesus demonstrates, sometimes, our faith demands that we speak out when it would be a lot easier to remain silent.

Silence and speech is a delicate balance. I am continually learning that it is sometimes necessary (perhaps, more often than not) to empty ourselves and enter the silence before speaking. When we quiet down and really listen, we will hear God speaking. And then, complete with the gift of human speech inspired by Lady Wisdom, we can become friends of God and prophets.

It's been a long time since my grandmother took me on her knee and whispered her kernels of wisdom into my ear. And while I can still hear her voice, I now know that words alone might not break bones, but they certainly can hurt, especially when they promote and invoke violence which can and does break more than just bones. I've also come to believe that words once spoken, in fact, can be repaired. It takes a lot of effort, time and determination. It demands humility and graciousness of heart. It is at the heart of what we call the work of reconciliation.

There's a lot of noise in our world right now. We receive these texts, this Holy Wisdom of God, in the midst of a season of political and religious rhetoric, a time of tough, angry, arrogant, revengeful, fearful, manipulative, and sometimes ignorant words.

May we all listen carefully to hear our God who is still speaking. May we speak our truth with love and graciousness, remembering the teaching of James, that the tongue is like a two-edged sword, able to both, bless and curse. And when we or someone else speaks or acts in a manner that feeds the crisis of civility, decency, compassion, respect, and honor, let us

recall and (when appropriate) repeat Jack's wise response: "I know you and you are better than that."