

March 29, 2009

The Dangers of Malice and Slander

Houghton Lake UMC

Lenten Sermon #5

Mark 7:17-23

Communication is a wonderful thing. As humans we have been given an awesome ability to communicate with each other. Our language skills far outmatch any other species on the planet (that we know of) and we have the ability to think literally, figuratively, concretely and abstractly. One of the most talented and versatile parts of our body is our tongue. It has the power to make us or break us. Therefore, the use of our tongue is something we must learn to control and use properly. God has also called us to be good stewards of the words we use and our gift to communicate with each other.

We have the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally, cognitively with purpose and skill or to meander with imagination and nonsense. We can speak with prose or with poetry, through speech or song. We can speak words with our mouth or we can use words on paper. We have the ability to be serious or to be funny, to misuse words to make a point or pun our way through a sentence to entertain. We can use words or gestures or signs or flags to communicate. Did you know that the human population today speaks some 6,500 languages? We can use secret codes, radio waves, or satellites. We have gone digital in this information age and we can now communicate in ways unthinkable just twenty-five years ago. Yes, communication is a wonderful thing.

In our communicating we can choose to be vocal or we can choose to be silent. Even our silence in certain situations can speak volumes. We can communicate facts and we can communicate concepts. We can communicate feelings and build or destroy relationships. We can remember the past and use communication to teach the next generation what we know. With our communication we can build up or tear down. We can build fences or bridges. We can make war or peace, or we can make excuses or we can ask for forgiveness. Through communication we can also reveal what is in our minds or what is in our hearts. We can brag and boast and make promises, we can share the truth, or we can deceive and lie. We can honor others and celebrate when others succeed. We can express arrogance or humility, dominance or servanthood, express demands or ask questions. Yes, my

friends, communication is a wonderful thing. We know that it is God who has given us this great gift to communicate. Not only can we communicate with each other, but we can also communicate spiritually with God. I believe the greatest miracle of communication comes when we pray. One of the most dangerous times to communicate is when we are angry. As we grow older and (hopefully) more mature, we should learn how to communicate more accurately and with a spirit of kindness and gentleness to all. So, we should not be surprised that God will hold us accountable for how we use our vast ability to communicate.

In today's text, what Jesus is saying is that from within us -- from our minds, from our hearts -- come those things that make us "unclean". The Greek says it this way: "all these evil things from within comes forth and defile a man." From within, from our spirit, "come forth" those things that make us unclean -- things that destroy us and may cause others and us harm. Therefore, we need to take seriously those things Jesus declares make us "unclean" and avoid them through spiritual discipline and practice. They are the "sins that so easily beset us" and bring death to us in so many ways. Communication can be our friend or it can be our downfall. The most important time for us to be careful stewards of our words is when we are angry.

How many times does our tongue get us into trouble? How many times do we wish that we could take back a comment made, a statement released in anger, or a careless word we blurted out in gossip or in frustration? Two of the sins that Jesus declared make us "unclean" are connected to our feelings of anger and our use of the tongue. They are the sins of malice and slander.

The Greek word for "iniquities" (*poneria*) is here translated malice. The Greek dictionary defines the word in a broader way with words like depravity, malice, plots, and sins of iniquity and wickedness. In the classical Greek period this word denoted poverty or need, having the sense of being sorrowful, unhappy, laden with care, bringing trouble, pitiable, unfit, unattractive, bad, unlucky, unsuccessful, politically useless, worthless and finally, morally reprehensible. According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament by Gerhard Kittel, in the New Testament it holds the sense of being bad, harmful, unserviceable and useless.

The English dictionary says that to have malice is to have *“ill will, the desire to harm another or to do mischief and spite. In the law; malice is defined as evil intent; a state of mind shown by intention to do, or the intentional doing of, something unlawful; a deliberate intentional plan to do something unlawful. It implies a deep-seated animosity that delights in causing others to suffer or in seeing them suffer; a wishing of evil toward another.”*

Previously when we talked about the sin of Cain that led to the murder of his brother Abel, we talked about envy and deceit being the fruit of anger. But malice can also be the result of anger. When God rejected his offering, Cain did not respond with a heart that was teachable, but instead he chose to get angry. His anger grew to envy and jealousy, and the evil thoughts of his mind led him to malice, ill will, and the desire to harm his brother -- even though his anger was really against God. When we feel anger welling up in our hearts we must be very careful how we express that anger so that nothing of value is harmed. Anger is not sin by itself, but what we do with our anger is often sin. We must also realize that people have not destroyed others with weapons or fists nearly as much as they have destroyed them with words. Our relationships are not only valuable but they are very fragile, and so must be handled with care. When we are angry we often abuse our relationships with words that cut and shatter, and in our anger we usually break relationships and pile more problems on top of the problems we already had because of what we have said in anger. In the English language how we say words is just as important as the words we choose. We can say “I love you” (tenderly) or we can say, “I love you” (angrily)... the same words, conveying totally different meanings. We can be angry and not sin. In fact, this is an exhortation of Paul in Ephesians 4:26. It takes strong spiritual discipline to learn how to do that. Anger is a good thing. Anger is not sin in itself. What we do in our anger, however, can be very destructive – sin -- what is “unclean” and destroys our lives and ultimately our relationship with God.

Let’s look at the word “slander”.

The Greek word for “blasphemy” is here translated as slander. “Blasphemia” means abusive speech, personal mockery and blasphemy. In the Septuagint (or the Greek translation of the Old

Testament), to blaspheme God is to dispute God's power, to desecrate his name or to violate his glory. It is also wicked speech or human arrogance. In the New Testament, blasphemy is to violate God's power and majesty. The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy when he forgave sins and when he claimed to be the Messiah, because in so doing he was making himself equal to God. This was the very reason the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus crucified. For the Christian, blasphemy includes doubting Jesus' claim to be the Son of God or deriding Jesus, thus using his name in vain.

The English dictionary defines the word slander as *“the utterance in the presence of another person of a false statement or statements, saying things damaging to a third person's character or reputation; usually distinguished from libel, which is slander in written form.”* To slander another person is to sin against them, to ruin their reputation. This is abusive speech....sin. When we sin with our tongue we can cause great damage to the person who receives the slander given. In our world slander is aimed toward a third party. When a person uses abusive speech directly to another person, we call it verbal abuse – something that is rampant in society today.

In the Chapter 3 of the Epistle of James we find these words about taming the tongue: *“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both*

fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”

Do Christians have the ability to use speech to destroy and to tear down? Absolutely, and too often it is so. And we can do our most brutal work when we “know we are right.” ...And when it happens it has to break the heart of God.

My friends, it is ok to be angry. Anger is our response to injustice, sin, abuse, and the misuse of power and authority. Anger can be a good thing. However, when we become angry we must be very careful how we express it, because we can use our anger to destroy or to save, to tear down or to redeem. We can use our anger to do further harm, or we can use our anger to make sure that no more harm is done. We can use our anger to make sure that good is accomplished in return, and that God is glorified. We can use our anger as the motivation to make sure that the poor are protected and the widow is safe, that the hungry are fed and that God’s will is accomplished in the world. We can use our anger to expose evil and to repair what was broken. We can expose the jealousy, envy, competition, malice and ill will, and use the opportunity to bring healing among rivals or to save the crushed and the injured. We can use words that heal. We can use words that redeem, that forgive, and that build bridges and reconcile.

Beware of malice and slander. Beware of words that destroy. Beware of the anger inside you, that you use it only to glorify God. Jesus did not have malice toward his enemies. He tried to teach them and show them their sin, their inconsistencies, and God’s love. The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, did show malice when they plotted to catch Jesus in his words and when they made plans to kill him. Malice was certainly at play with Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Malice and slander are sin, and to entertain either will destroy us. They will make us “unclean”. If malice is found in our heart we need to repent of it immediately. If slander is found on our lips we must confess our error, seek forgiveness for our words, and seek to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with God -- John Wesley’s “Three Simple Rules” (the topic of our current Lenten study). We are called to love our enemies and to pray for those who use us. We are called to have praise on our lips as expressions of

our hearts and not let evil or malice overtake us, but rather to put away slander and build up those around us. We can surrender our anger to the Lord, allowing him to turn that anger into blessing and praise to God. Let's make this the practice of our hearts and of our lips in a very intentional way of glorifying God..

Let us pray.....

Thank you, Lord, for the ability to communicate, to listen, and to forgive each other. Let us not harbor evil in our hearts toward our neighbors, or allow anger to dictate our feelings or our lives. Instead, let forgiveness reign in our lives and let us use our tongues to glorify your name and to guide our human relationships. Let our words be kind and gentle, instructive and patient. Defeat the anger and malice that may reside in our hearts. Let us recognize these sins as destructive, and help us to give those things to you so that we can concentrate on pleasing you and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

In your name we pray,

Amen.