

“A Time to Speak, and a Time to Keep Silence”
Mark 8:27-33; Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12; Psalm 19:1-4

Proverbs 1:20-33

- ²⁰Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
- ²¹At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
- ²²“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
- ²³Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
- ²⁴Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
- ²⁵and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
- ²⁶I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
²⁷when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
- ²⁸Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
- ²⁹Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
³⁰would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
- ³¹therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.

³²For waywardness kills the simple,
 and the complacency of fools destroys them;
³³but those who listen to me will be secure
 and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

James 3:1-12

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters,
 for you know that we who teach
 will be judged with greater strictness.

²For all of us make many mistakes.
 Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect,
 able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us,
 we guide their whole bodies.

⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large
 that it takes strong winds to drive them,
 yet they are guided by a very small rudder
 wherever the will of the pilot directs.

⁵So also the tongue is a small member,
 yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

⁶And the tongue is a fire.

The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity;
 it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature,
 and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature,
 can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

⁸but no one can tame the tongue—
 a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father,
and with it we curse
those who are made in the likeness of God.

¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.
My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening
both fresh and brackish water?

¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives,
or a grapevine figs?
No more can salt water yield fresh.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

HYMN “Though I May Speak”

Mark 8:27-37

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi;
and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still
others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

³⁰And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great
suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,
and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite
openly.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan!

For you are setting your mind not on divine things
but on human things.”

The Sermon

Brie is the name she gave herself as she wrote to an online forum that was something like an internet version of the old “Dear Abby” advice column that used to run in newspapers.

Brie was writing to ask whether she needed to apologize for an episode resulting from a visit that she and her husband Will were enduring from an old college friend of Will’s named Gary, with whom Will hadn’t been in contact for some years. At the time Brie was writing, they were still just a couple of days into the visit.

Gary had arrived at the beginning of the week; they welcomed him into their home and pretty soon were sitting down to dinner.

Not too far into it, Brie realized something that Will apparently had forgotten about, which was that Gary talked a lot.

As Brie and Will sat listening, Gary talked. And talked. And talked.

He talked incessantly. He talked about himself. He talked rudely. He talked over them. He had an opinion about everything.

Somehow, they made it through dinner, and, as previously planned, Will and Gary spent most of the next day together before meeting up with Brie at a nice restaurant.

They sat down, and immediately Gary launched into another monologue.

At one point, he had to pause for half a second just to take a breath, and Brie started to say something. But Gary started up again and just bulldozed right over her.

She said, “Excuse me! Don’t talk over me.”

Gary laughed apologetically; he said, “You’re right; I’m sorry; I know I talk too much. I should have let you finish”—and then he kept going.

Will interjected and said, “Gary, I want to hear what Brie has to say.”

So, Gary apologized again, waited while Brie finished what she had started to say, and then just started back up. He didn’t even listen.

So, the food arrives. The server puts everybody’s plates down in front of them. And Gary keeps talking.

Finally, Brie said, she pushed her salad aside, grabbed Gary’s plate with an untouched steak on it, pulled it across the table so it was right in front of her, and started eating Gary’s steak.

Guess what! Gary stopped talking. He looked stunned; then he looked angry, and said, “Please stop eating my steak.”

Brie kept eating.

In what she described as “glorious silence,” she ate the whole thing.

I love that, because you don’t just do that in ten seconds. It takes minutes.

Finishing up, she apologized, and said, “I’m sorry; I know I eat too much. I should have let you finish your steak.”ⁱ

I would like to think that maybe this was a teachable moment for ol' Gary. Maybe even a religious experience.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!
 And the tongue is a fire.
 It's placed among our members as a world of iniquity;
 It stains the whole body,
 sets on fire the cycle of nature,
 and is itself set on fire by Hell, *Gary!*”

And it's not just *overuse* of the tongue that's at issue; part of the point of the letter of James is that it's easy to fall into *misuse*, even with the best intentions. First of all, there's the misuse of just being rude and thoughtless and talking at people without ever stopping to listen and hear them.

And then there is the massive responsibility of it, as great as the responsibility of, say, driving a car, or owning a gun, or being able to have children.

“Not many of you should become teachers,” says James. “As you know, we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes.”

Even Jesus, talking with the disciples, got to that moment when he asks, “Who do you say that I am?”

And Peter gives the answer: “You are the Messiah.”

YES! Yes. Peter has declared his faith and announced the arrival of God's anointed one. In this moment, Peter has become a prophet by what he has just said.

And the response from Jesus is: *Nobody say a word about this*—“sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”

Karl Barth, arguably the foremost Protestant theologian of the 20th century—back when that was like a really cool thing to be—had this dialectical thing going on (dia-lectic, as in two different things being said):

On one hand, we who know Jesus Christ cannot help, and are actually compelled, to share that great, great good news. That's what you do with news, right? Especially good news: if you don't tell it, how is it even news?

And on the other hand, no mortal can ever come close to being able to speak even appropriately, let alone definitively or authoritatively, about the infinite Truth and Beauty that is God.ⁱⁱ

Theology is a vague hope. I don't mean belief in the existence of God is just hope; I mean the act of theologizing itself. At best—at best—our words can only point beyond themselves to a reality that is vaster than all possibilities of human expression.

Which is interesting at this moment in history, because it kind of feels like we're all Gary now. There's so much talk, and so much of it is empty and blusterous and slanted and the opposite of wisdom. And there is so little listening.

It's many years ago now that Rodger Nishioka had arrived at a conference with people from all over the world. He was walking past an African whom he had met before and, by way of saying hello, casually said, "Hey, how are you?" and kept walking—until he was surprised to realize after he'd gone well past the guy that he was actually answering his question, telling him how he was doing.

Rodger went back and they talked a little bit, and the guy said, "I've noticed something when you Americans talk. When we Africans talk to each other, one person speaks, and then *listens* while the next person

speaks. When Americans have a conversation, it looks more like one person speaks, and then *waits for their turn to speak again.*”

There is a great deal of talking going on these days. Our ears are flooded with voices who serve self-interested human agendas rather than God’s divine agenda.

It’s out in the street, it’s in the squares where Wisdom raises her voice; at the busiest corner, and at the entrance of the city gates;

It’s in our lunch rooms and spin rooms and safe rooms and bedrooms; it’s in our highest offices and in our most pervasive media.

It’s the kind of talk that denies realities even when they are observably true, scientifically measurable, historically substantiated,

and chooses, strategically, to say, “Well, they’re all lying. It’s a conspiracy.”

Two things I notice from the readings today:

One, God provides and commends divine wisdom rather than human wisdom;

And two, disciples are supposed to be circumspect—
reflective, thoughtful, careful with our words—
before we start talking.

When we start buying lies and nonsense,
that serve human rather than divine interests,
it makes it easier for us to peddle lies and deceitfulness, too.

We get tempted to cut corners ourselves to get to what we want,
to make sure we win the competition—
and in this mindset, everything becomes competition.

And when I have surrendered to the will
 to deal in dishonesty,
 to love being—in the worst, most unreflective sense—simple;
 to take delight in scoffing,
 which is epidemic in our media right now;
 to hate knowledge, which is the tactic of people and powers
 whose interests are specifically in us not asking questions...

When I've jumped into that pool with both feet,
 Wisdom says, "Because you have ignored all my counsel
 and would have none of my reproof, I will laugh at your calamity."

It's not that God will abandon me to the results of my missteps;
 It's not that Jesus is going to laugh at me when I'm in trouble;
 It's not that the Holy Spirit is going to make fun of me, spitefully,
 when I'm suffering the results of my self-inflicted calamities.

It's just the reality that
 when God's wisdom itself is abandoned and ignored,
 when people make decisions
 based on self-interested "conventional wisdom,"
 calamity is practically inevitable.

With the state of the world right now,
 when I'm more involved in my own self-justifying self-interest
 than in submitting myself to God's wisdom
 as given in God's Word and ratified
 in the person of Jesus Christ and in his resurrection.
 people die, children suffer, injustices go unresolved.

According to Mark, Jesus was speaking "quite openly" about his own
 imminent suffering and rejection and violent death, to be followed by his
 resurrection.

And Peter rebuked him. These words that Jesus was saying were incendiary—obviously not what Peter wanted to hear. Whether it was the word of God or not, Peter found it worthy of rebuke.

Sometimes we find things worthy of rebuke because they are so wrong they are offensive.

And sometimes we find things worthy of rebuke
because they are so offensively accurate—
because we cannot escape their demand that we change
our lives or our minds or our habits
in order to follow Jesus into the world,

and we feel like that's way too much to ask
when we're perfectly happy with our interpretation of the world,
thank you very much,
and we've established a way of living and seeing others
that suits us just fine.

Don't ask me to change, Jesus;
if there are hungry people out there,
if there are people who are one slippery step away from the cliff
every day,
if there is a constantly growing sorority of mothers
whose hearts will never recover from having seen their children
bleed out on American city streets,
if every week there are new mass shootings and
“we can't figure out what the problem might be,”
And if I'm not in that condition,
it seems like it must be about *them*
and has nothing to do with *me*.

So, don't tell me, says Peter, that my Lord and Savior and Master has to suffer, and be rejected, and be killed for this broken world.

Because if the one I follow has to do all that,
I may or may not be called on to give *that* much,
but I'm going to be called to give up something.
Maybe everything.

And we're pretty great, to be honest, at giving more than almost anybody else in the world gives *of what we can afford* to give away.

But when your demands, Jesus, touch the electric fence around my comfort zone, there's going to be a rebuke.

I'm interested, though, that Mark doesn't offer any explanation of what Peter is rebuking him for.

Maybe it's not the painful implications of the impending suffering and death of Jesus.

Maybe it's the almost unbelievable good news—literally “in-credible” to Peter—that three days later, Jesus will rise again.

Maybe that good news is so good that Peter jumps all the way to the assumption that it couldn't possibly be true, because nothing in his life to this point has prepared him for something so encouraging, so miraculous, so life-affirming.

Maybe Karl Barth was right: that we were put on this earth to proclaim the good news day and night to everyone who can hear us,

even though no human being will ever be able to tell it comprehensively or even adequately.

What we are charged and equipped for doing
is to tell the truth of God, and God's wisdom;

and to learn how to listen to God and to each other:

to hear more than we say,
to listen more than we speak,
to think before we speak,
to speak up on behalf of those
 whose voices have been taken from them,
to be silent when God says, “be still, and know that I am God,”

and to be sure that when we do speak,
 with every day and night and the whole universe,
 our actions and even our silence are telling the glory of God,
 and our words are proclaiming God’s handiwork.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ “Steak and Potatoes,” Endless Thread podcast, WBUR (Boston) and Reddit. July 19, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 186. A wonderfully accessible summary and interpretation of Barth’s original writing and thought can be found in John R. Franke, *Barth for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 66ff.