Sermon for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 12, 2021

James 3:1-12

In the 1970s, researchers identified a tendency among humans to believe things that they would not have previously held to be true. They discovered that the introduction and repetition of information could be enough to convince people to change their minds.

They called this effect “illusory truth,” or “the illusion of truth.”

Essentially, when presented with new information, we test it against what we already believe to be true. The researchers found that repeating a statement gave it the illusion of being true. The more a statement was repeated, the higher the chance someone would begin to doubt what they previously believed.

This is what makes bullying so effective.

When you hear, day in and day out, that you are defective, when you are mocked and belittled multiple times a day, eventually it’s easy to accept it as being true. And when you overhear another person being bullied, day in and day out, it becomes easier to accept what the bully says. It becomes easier for the person being bullied to be diminished in your eyes.

And the more that negative information is repeated, the harder it is to replace it with the truth.

James reminds us in our Epistle reading for today that we are all created in the image of God.

It can be hard for that to stick, to become a sticky truth for us. Something that can’t be doubted. Something we can make an essential part of who we understand ourselves to be. So much a part of us that it doesn’t matter how often someone tells us something different, we still hold fast to the promise that we are a beloved creation of God.

This is why I have developed a habit of reminding you of who you are. It’s easy for the good news that God loves us, that God values each of us, that, through Christ, God is at work in the world, reconciling the world to Himself, and not counting our sins against us — it’s easy for that to be drowned out by the sea of negative messages we receive daily. Messages that tell us we’re imperfect — we’re too fat or too thin, we don’t dress fashionably enough, we don’t buy the right things. We don’t have the right political opinions. We aren’t good enough or smart enough or successful enough. Therefore, we’re not worthy of love or joy or a happy life.

It’s all a bit much sometimes. And it’s really easy for those negative messages to cause us to wobble in our ability to trust in the good news.

And it’s really easy for us to fall into the trap of delivering those messages to others, whether we intend to or not.

But Jesus didn’t die so we could treat people the way he was treated — lied about, distrusted, maligned, considered a threat for doing crazy things like insisting people care about the welfare of people who are vulnerable. Insisting that people honor God not through empty ritual but through being invested in the well-being of God’s creation.

Jesus died to show us the power of God’s love, which is stronger than death, stronger than all the forces of evil, stronger than anything or anyone that seeks to divide or diminish that which God has created.

Recently, I’ve been re-watching one of my favorite shows, *The Good Place*. In the first few episodes, we’re introduced to the main characters. One is Jianyu, a Buddhist monk who took a vow of silence on earth and continues to keep that vow after death.

Jianyu seems wise. He nods his head sagely. He doesn’t engage in the fun things other people are doing.

But eventually, we learn that Jianyu is not who he is believed to be. He’s not a wise monk. He’s Jason, a dim-witted wannabe DJ from Jacksonville, who died in a *very* poorly executed attempt to rob a restaurant.

What gave everybody the impression Jianyu was wise? He never spoke. He bridled his tongue so effectively that he seemed to be someone he was not.

James encourages us to learn to bridle our tongues, not so we can try to fool people into thinking we’re wiser than we actually are, but as a spiritual discipline, a part of our obedience to God.

This is a part of what Jesus means when he talks in our Gospel text today about denying ourselves.

Denying ourselves is not about living without nothing. It’s not about having no self-worth. It’s not about being a lesser version of who we were created to be, or trying to be someone we aren’t. It’s not about taking a vow of silence, but being intentional with what we choose to say.

It’s about living *not for ourselves*, but for Christ.

God’s intent is for us to become fully realized versions of who God created us to be. To become who God created us to be means producing the fruit God intends for us to produce. As James says, figs don’t come from grapevines, grapes don’t come from fig trees.

And we, who are created in the image of God, should produce fruit worthy of who we are created to be.

Denying ourselves, “death to self means releasing all our desires, our reputation, our glory, and having our way with other people.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And replacing that with a life lived in service of God, a life that operates trusting in the promises of salvation and forgiveness of our sins. A life that is ordered upon trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Messiah.

Our words have the capacity to build up or tear down. To create or destroy. To bear fruit worthy of who we are created to be. Or poison that seeps into the hearts of those around us.

May God bless our efforts to bear fruit worthy of who we are created to be, and continue to show mercy when we fall short.

1. Dallas Willard, *Life Without Lack* ch. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)