

James 3: 1-12
Mark 8: 27-38
September 16, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

I have told a number of you the joke about the minister who was absolutely passionate about golf. One Sunday morning he woke. It was an absolutely spectacular day. Still damp with dew the lush green course called to him. Oh, how he wrestled with his soul! No one would be on the course at this hour. The breeze was light. There was not a cloud in the sky. There was just one problem. It was Sunday morning. He was expected at church.

Like the old cartoons, immediately two angels appeared: one with a pitchfork and one with a halo. The angel with the halo reminded him of his responsibilities. The angel with the pitchfork cooed to him about the beauty of the day and how he had never missed a Sunday. Why couldn't he just call in sick just this once?

This debate went on in his head for a while. And since this is a joke and not a pious message, I can tell you that the angel with the pitchfork won the day. The minister called in sick and went, with an appropriate amount of guilt to the golf course.

Having lost the debate the angel with the halo goes to heaven to plead with Jesus. "Jesus! This is terrible! The minister has been tempted by the devil to abandon his church to play golf! Stop him! Do something about this!"

"Just relax," Jesus replies. Let's see what happens.

The minister arrives at the golf course. The sleepy young clerk who receives the greens fee has not yet arrived. Full of excitement and the awareness that he was doing a wild and dangerous thing; the minister removes the golf clubs from the trunk of his car and proceeds to the first tee. Upon arrival closes his eyes and breathes in the sweet morning air. He notices,

perhaps for the first time on a Sunday morning, the tuneful chirps of the birds and the sun glinting of the still moist fairways.

“Jesus,” cries the angel, he is actually enjoying himself! Don’t make this a pleasurable experience for him! Send rain, thunder, lightning and hail! Drive him off the course so that he knows you are angry!

“Calm down, little one,” Jesus answers, “Let’s see what happens next.

Having put his tee in the ground, his ball on the tee and taken some practice swings, the minister takes his position and, having located the flag marking the first hole, swings his club and hits the ball. He has hit the sweet spot. The ball leaps off his club and traces a long beautiful arc right down the middle of the course. He has never hit a golf shot this long and true in his life. The ball carries to the green and after a few bounces rolls straight into the hole. He has hit a “hole-in-one.”

The angel is horrified! “Jesus, how can you allow this to happen/? Not only have you let this man abandon his ministry and lie to his parishioners, you have permitted him to savor this beautiful day when he should be working. And now you have permitted...no- I think you have helped him to hit a hole-in-one! What’s wrong with you! What has happened to your standards? Why haven’t you punished him!

Jesus pauses and smiles. “Oh, don’t you worry. This man will be punished and I won’t have to do a thing.

“How is that going to happen?” asks the angel.

After a pause and with a wicked sparkle in his eye Jesus replies, “Well, angel, after lying to his church, who can he tell about his hole-in-one?

It interests me that, more often than not, Jesus tells his disciples and all who he heals to keep quiet. Today's gospel lesson is no exception. After Peter responds to Jesus' question, "But who do *you say that I am?*" with the words, "You are the Messiah, the Anointed One," Jesus charges them all to keep quiet. Time after time Jesus charges people who have been healed to tell no one. Why does he do this?

Well, the obvious reason is that he does not want to be overwhelmed by multitudes of people coming to him. He does not want to be distracted by his primary purpose of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It is hard and draining work being Jesus. He must prioritize. He must say no sometimes. He must get away to pray. He is not interested in popularity.

But I believe there is a deeper purpose. I propose that Jesus tells his disciples and everyone else to keep quiet for a profound but simple reason. They are clueless about who Jesus is and why he says and does what he says and does. All they know is that he is powerful prophet and healer who performs miracles. They have no sense of his deeper purpose. And if they run off announcing to everyone they see, "Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah! Jesus rocks! Jesus is a superstar!" People will flock to him for all the wrong reasons. They will follow him for a while; but when the tough stuff happens and he stops meeting their expectations of what a messiah should do, they will reject him and call for his death.

Which is, of course, precisely what happened!

In a perfect world there is a gracious relationship between thought, feeling and speech. We hear or observe something. In the calm silence of our soul-filled minds we receive and reflect on what we have heard and seen. It is integrated into our past experience and future

hopes. So, when we respond, our words and actions are thoughtful and balanced. Our responses contribute to a larger flow of thought and action. As we have gained a clearer and truer understanding of a given idea or situation, so our response spurs even more clarity and truthfulness. When we respond this way we are operating according to God's original design.

But, as we all know, this is not a perfect world. With a few notable exceptions, perhaps the Dalai Lama, head of the Tibetan Buddhist path, all human beings are a jumble of confused and confusing reactions to the world around us. I use the word reaction intentionally. Our brains are so overactive with anticipating threats to our security, so fearful and anxious and flat out busy, that this calm which lies at the center of our lives has no visitors. We almost never make it to that calm place where God is. Instead our interior experience is far more like a high powered tennis match. We are always preparing to return whatever life hits at us.

As a result, we speak before we think. We react before we reflect. And so it is that when we say and do anything under pressure it is our fear and anxiety that speaks. We never make it to our calm pool at the heart of our lives. This is why when our mouths open under pressure we say angry and hurtful things. And these angry and hurtful things, far from contributing to clarity and truthfulness set spark a chain reaction of defensiveness and anger and heart. We end up feeling isolated, misunderstood, rejected and marginalized.

This is why James, the brother of Jesus, takes a page from his famous sibling and calls the Christians of his acquaintance to see the tongue as a terrible and wonderful organ of the soul. It is like fire, which can bring warmth and comfort, cook food and bring light; *or* the same fire can burn down a house destroying lives and property. Many are the houses of faith that have burned to the ground because of careless and fiery words.

This morning I call us to a journey of restraining our speech. I call us to grow to tell the difference between words and actions which are prompted by fear, anxiety and resentment; and those which come from time spent at the calm pool where the gracious relationship between thought speech and actions is restored. I invite us to embark upon a discipline of restraining the need to respond immediately—to get off the tennis court and wait in quiet for the Lord's own calm.

And so when we do speak it is with love and the desire to promote peace—and not just any peace: the peace of Christ. Amen.