

May 3, 2020 – 1 Peter 2:19-25 & John 10:1-10

Letters. Telephone. E-mail. Text message. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Snapchat. Facetime. Skype. Zoom. The list is seemingly endless. And it grows longer everyday. People are able to communicate with one other in more ways now more than ever before.

Which means that now more than ever before it is important for Christians to be careful about what we say. Yes, all these methods of communication are wonderful during a time of social distancing like this. But they are also that many more ways that we need to be cautious about our what we are saying. Because words matter. They matter a lot, in fact. Jesus himself said that.

There was an incident recorded in Matthew 15, for example, when Jesus was confronted by a group of Pharisees. And the Pharisees were angry because Jesus' disciples weren't following particular Jewish customs. Especially in regards to how they ate.

Because the Pharisees believed that if you didn't wash your hands in just the right way, and wash your plates and knives in just the right way and cook your food in just the right way, that meant it was unclean. And it would make you unclean to eat it.

But Jesus said no, you've got it all wrong. *"It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."* Later, he explained further, *"what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander."*

Think about that for a second. Jesus just put murder, theft, and adultery on the same level as spreading rumors and lying about your neighbor. Clearly, we need to watch what we say.

And so, we do just that every time we gather for worship and confess our sins. What do we say on Sunday morning? "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed." Words matter. Words can be very, very sinful. Words need to be confessed and forgiven.

And yet, it's not just the sinfulness of the words we say that needs to be on our minds as Christians. But the holiness of those words as well. In these weeks after Easter this year, we've been reading through the book of 1 Peter. A letter that is very much about the concept of holiness. And about moving toward the kingdom of God and away from the things of this world.

Today, we tackle an interesting section. Peter has thus far been talking about holiness from a theoretical standpoint. About who and what we are in God's eyes. And today he starts talking about what that means in our daily life.

Because we are holy. By the work of the Holy Spirit through the Holy Word of God and Holy Baptism, we have been made holy. We live in holiness. But what does that look like? We are different from the the world around us. Peculiar in their eyes. But what does that actually mean?

From the looks of Peter's letter, it seems like his original readers have already drawn some conclusions about what all this means. And they've gotten it really, really wrong.

Because they've decided that to be holy means to be exempt from all authority except God alone. To them, being free from sin means being free from any earthly responsibilities. Because they are subject to God's law, they are not subject to any human law. They can do whatever they want, and no one can stop them.

So if they are citizens and they want to defy the governor or the emperor, they can. If they are slaves and they want to disobey their masters, they can. If they are wives and they want to leave their husbands, they can.

That's at least what they think. They're wrong, of course. For several reasons. And Peter is quick to put them back in their place. But in the process, he teaches us something about what it means to live a holy life.

And most of all, it means to follow in Christ's footsteps. He is our Good Shepherd. We are Jesus' little lambs. We go where he goes. We do what he does. We drink the water he gives us. We eat the food he feeds us. We follow where his voice leads. We live as Jesus lived. We act as Jesus acted. We speak as Jesus spoke.

And so we obey the laws, even when they are unjust. Even when they are applied unjustly. Even when they are abused by unjust men. We obey them. And we accept that we might suffer in the process. But we know that it is better to suffer for the sake of doing good than to suffer for the sake of doing evil.

Because that's what Christ did. He suffered because of unjust laws applied in unjust ways by unjust men. And, in the process, he didn't just suffer without purpose. He suffered for our sake. For the sake of his kingdom.

Likewise, we too, when we suffer, do so for a purpose. We suffer for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ. And we suffer for the sake of Christ's kingdom.

And yet, it wasn't just the suffering of Christ that was holy in God's eyes. It was the way he suffered. And in that, we follow in his footsteps as well.

Because Jesus did not go to the cross complaining. And cursing. And threatening. And begging for his life. And condemning his captors. As Peter says, "*He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*"

No, in truth, Jesus was led silently, like a lamb to the slaughter. He was the shepherd, but he loved his sheep so much, that he laid down his own life for us. Can you imagine that? Letting yourself be killed so that the sheep of your flock may live.

Jesus was silent as he went to the cross for us. And now Peter tells us to watch our words. Because following Christ isn't just about suffering and holiness in our words isn't just about avoiding sin.

No following Christ means, occasionally, suffering in silence. And holiness in our words means, occasionally, saying very little at all. Why?

Well, because sometimes the greatest, most important testimony to your faith that you can make involves saying nothing. Sometimes all we can do as Christians is to do as Christ did: To put our lives in the Father's hands. To say, "Not my will, but yours be done." And let the world do what it wants to us.

Because, in the end, it can't do anything. The church Peter wrote to was wrong. But it was only partly wrong. We must obey the laws and the authorities of this world, even when they are unjust.

But ultimately, we are free of them. Those who judge unjustly can only punish us for a lifetime. But when we entrust ourselves to he who judges justly, we secure a reward for all eternity. By his wounds, we are healed. And by his resurrection, we live and live abundantly. We live and live eternally.

And so we die to sin and we live to righteousness. Knowing that sometimes that death means being led like a lamb to the slaughter. But also knowing that always that life means being returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

We journey on toward holiness. Through a world that would crucify us. But toward a life that never ends. Amen.