

Sermon Text for September 14, 2014

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Joshua 2:1-7, James 5:12

“You said what?”

This past week I did something I’ve never done before. I went to a pig farm. John Meck pastor at Strasburg Mennonite showed me around his place and I was impressed. At any one time they could have over 2,000 pigs there. I spent about 2 hours there and as I was leaving he said, you may have gotten used to the smell and you won’t notice it on you, but you might want to change your clothes before you head back to the church. I did have my church clothes on and wasn’t planning on it, but when I got in my car I knew as soon as I was in the room with someone they would know something was a little different about me. There was no hiding where I had been because it clung to me and I couldn’t get it off unless I completely changed.

I changed, but isn’t that what James has been telling us all along. When we walk apart and away from the Lord we may not know it, but our actions and our attitudes stink, and they become signs for those around us that something is up. It tells people that we really don’t love Jesus like we say we do. We can’t just blend in and pretend all is good if our actions contradict the love that Jesus has for us and the life God wants for us.

Today, we focus on another aspect of our life which has been covered in a different way in past scriptures in James. He addressed our tongue and called it untamable. We looked at gossip and identified it as the most pernicious and prevalent sin in our church today, and it continues, it hasn’t stopped. Today James encourages us to recognize that every word we speak reflects our relationship with Jesus. The presence of Jesus in our lives is manifested by an integrity displayed in our lives by honesty. James’ view is that every word is spoken in the presence of God and ought, therefore, be true.

I heard someone tell me the other day I just don’t know what to believe anymore. She was talking to me about the political climate in which we live in the US today. We had representative Greiner speak to the lunch bunch and it was refreshing to hear him express what he believed was true, even if it didn’t necessarily jive with all those seated around the table. On Wednesday I present to the Rotary of Lancaster on Russia and the current mess we have going on there. The Russians are being told that all this is taking place to prevent a genocide of Russian heritage people by the Ukrainians, it is an act of self defense is what is being fed to the people through the media. It is a lie, and the people are buying it, Putin is more popular now than he has ever been.

The NFL denies it ever knew about the video of Ray Rice knocking out his fiancé in the elevator. Oscar Pistorius denies knowing his wife was the one on the other side of the gun, it was just self-defense. But the result is that one woman has been beaten and another is dead. It is hard to give people the benefit of the doubt when our news is filled with people who are dishonest and whose dishonesty can ultimately lead to tragic consequences.

Our first Scripture today is one of those that should give us pause. It is a very familiar one of Rahab welcoming the Israelite spies into her home in Jericho. The scene is set where you have two spies sent to scope out the land and all we hear is that they end up in the house of a prostitute. Sounds like our Secret Service all over again. So strike one. The king hears about this and wants to capture them but Rahab tells a convincing lie to put the king's men off their scent and it works. They aren't here, but they were. The curious thing is that throughout Scripture this lying prostitute is lifted up as a hero. She is included in Jesus' genealogy, Hebrews tells us in 11:31 that she is a woman of faith and already we saw in James 2:5 that she is mentioned as someone justified in what she did and it was a reflection of her faith.

But what she said was a lie! Jesus could have said just a little white lie and spared himself the cross, but at the cost of damnation for all of us. We lift up martyrs because as the term suggests they are witnesses and are killed because they are not afraid to speak the truth upon which they base their lives.

One of the more interesting aspects of my work in Russia was to interview refugees who had undergone unspeakable atrocities so that we could get them into the United States to be resettled. More often than not these refugees would make up stories to add to their already painful pasts just to be sure they would be chosen because of their stories. Homeland security had told me that if they were to be found lying either on their application or when they had a chance to interview them that they would automatically be disqualified. Dishonesty, they told me, was grounds for refusal. It was difficult to convince the refugees that their stories were already compelling enough that they didn't have to add to them or try to convince Homeland Security that there were worse things than lying in order to get out of the hell that Moscow was for most of them.

James doesn't address speaking falsely in order to save the Israelites who would then help conquer Jericho or the refugees whose best hope was to resettle in a country where at least most people are indignant over, unarmed innocent people of color being attacked and killed. What James does in these verses is basically repeat the words of his brother Jesus who states in Matthew 5:34-37. Let's read those words... You have to see the parallel. He is not addressing

profanity or swear words, but rather the need in that time period for people to make oaths on certain objects or things or people so others knew they were serious.

You've heard the term I swear on my mother's grave. For the Godfather this was a big deal. Some people say I swear to God. Not a good thing to say and in fact James states you probably just crossed the line that isn't good to cross. Or cross my heart, hope to die, stuck a needle in my eye. What is up with that? Both Jesus and James states that we should have enough integrity that when we say yes, that should be enough for people to know we will do something. Or if we say no that we are telling the truth and don't have to prove it.

When we speak, our words have to reflect a truth that we find in our relationship with Jesus Christ and that can never be compromised. I got a phone call from the wife of my good friend, you know the Jewish guy that I played basketball with in college who would always ask me if I thought he was going to heaven or not? Well, she is writing a book because their 6 year old son put them in crisis. They don't go to church, there is no religious discussion in the home but one day she was home with their boy and he said I'm homesick. She said, but you're home, why would you be homesick? He said, I don't know, I just feel really lonely.

She realized this was a spiritual question and she was not equipped to address it and they were not giving their kids what they needed to answer their questions. What are we missing, she asked me. I told her about Jesus and how not only does he provide truth to speak to that question of loneliness, but also gives the type of meaning that secular humanism can never pretend to provide.

What James states here is crucial for so many aspects of our life as he begins: "Above all" which basically means most importantly. You need to be a man or a woman of your word so that when you speak people will actually believe you. Paul in Ephesians 4:25 states that we have to put away falsehood and we must speak truth to our neighbor because we belong to each other. We are in a relationship to one another that requires us to trust each other so it requires us to speak the truth to each other.

It is said that true Christian character requires few words. Peter in Matthew 26:74 when he was questioned about his allegiance to Jesus swore and then took an oath that he did not know Jesus. This is the example James may have had in mind as his community was being chased down in the streets and persecuted for their faith. Let your love for Jesus be reflected in a simple yes and your refusal to succumb to the pressures of society with a simple no.

James has been laying out for us over these weeks a vision of a church community that is absolutely glorious. One where love has to be genuine, where every single member is honest

with each other in love and compassion. He lays out before us a family that works tirelessly for each other and for the community with a servant heart that thinks of themselves last and others first. A church that understands that when we say we are going with God it just might come at the sacrifice of those things which we find the most comforting about our church.

James challenges us today with a vision where every word we speak is as if we were speaking it to God himself who encourages us along a journey that leads us closer and closer to his Son. Amen.