

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2021
St. Paul's, Syracuse
Rev. Kathy Major

I was ordained to the Priesthood on September 16, 2000. My best friend, Betsy, was ordained a year later – on September 15, 2001. We weren't sure her ordination would go ahead, coming the first Saturday after that horrendous Tuesday, the 11th. In the diocese of New York, the diocese where we were ordained, all the ordinands get ordained together at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in one large, glorious service. It was the first priestly ordination for our new bishop, The Rt. Rev. Mark Sisk. He decided that the ordination should go ahead. And in his sermon to the newly ordained he said that Tuesday, September 11th, would mark the entirety of their priesthood in ways we could not yet imagine...

Who could have imagined that Tuesday twenty years ago? Who would have imagined that the war begun in retaliation would last for twenty years?

Who would have believed that the same nation that pulled together after that Tuesday would be so torn apart today by conspiracy theories, half-truths, hateful speech and violence?

James is right, isn't he? "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!"

Our tongues can say the most wonderful things, tender words, kind words, comforting and comfortable words. And our tongues can also say the meanest, most hurtful, nastiest, untrue things. The good and the bad are part of who we are – remember Jesus said that it isn't what is brought into us that makes us unclean, but what comes *out* of us that reveals our uncleanness. Our tongues catch us; show us for what we are inside.

Here we have another week of lessons that show us, in practical ways, how we ought to live as followers of Jesus. Our words are important, what we say and how we say it is important because our words, what we say and how we say it will bring people closer to God or push them farther away. We are the ambassadors of Christ, right? We are followers of Jesus, disciples of Christ, and so we are examples to the world of what Christianity, what God's love and the redeeming grace of Jesus are all about. Our speech ought to reflect God's love for us, our love for God and our love for each person made in God's image - everyone.

I've been ordained for almost twenty-one years now. Every three years I'm preaching from the Letter of James and every three years I think the world is meaner than the last time we read his letter. Ah James, we agree with you when you say that no one can tame the tongue, it's a restless evil, full of deadly poison!

Peter is a great example of our human frailty when it comes to speech. In our passage from Mark, Peter proclaims the gospel that Jesus is Messiah. And then he pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Why does Peter rebuke Jesus? Because Jesus is explaining what Messiah is going to do – Jesus tells them that he's going to suffer, be rejected, be killed and then

resurrected. Peter doesn't want Jesus to say such things because, as we see over and over in the gospels, the disciples expect that Messiah will overthrow the Roman government and set up God's kingdom on Earth. Peter and the disciples expect that they will reign in Messiah's kingdom – they expect to come into power with Jesus.

What Jesus proposes, though, is the opposite of what Peter and the others want. God's kingdom is an upside-down kingdom, where Messiah gives up his life, where the greatest is the least, where those who want to lead must serve. Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their lives for the sake of the gospel will save them.

There is an undercurrent to our national conversation that links God, Christianity, country, democracy and capitalism. I believe that the very real anger we see and hear from each other is about the change we see our society moving through. It's not clear how the national and world economies are going to come through this pandemic. Folks have lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost savings, lost homes, and just about lost hope. There is a fear that even the very underpinnings of our democratic society are about to be lost.

Even IF we lost everything, God would still be God. We would still be beloved. God's kingdom would still be secure. God loves the whole world. No matter WHAT happens to the US or the rest of the globe, no matter what else happens, the most important things will not change – God loves us and we are God's people. We are all held in God's loving hands. We are safe and secure.

If we are going to be light and salt in our world, if we're going to use our tongues to spread the gospel of God's love, we've got to give up our notions of power and supremacy. We are called, not to be first, but to be last. We're called to serve, not to rule; called to share what we have, not reach out and grab for what we believe ought to be ours.

By giving up our lives, by giving up our need to lord it over others, by sharing our treasure, we have the freedom to be with others, no matter where they might be, no matter their need, no matter their social standing or background. By following Jesus, in his humility and his gentle strength and his powerful service, we bring hope and God's love to the world around us.

We are called to use gracious words, to do what we can for this world that is so precious in God's sight. God has promised that when we don't know what to say, the Spirit will speak through us, if we only give Spirit the chance. God has promised that the Spirit will guide us in what we should do and how we should live, if we give ourselves over. We need the horse's bit, the small rudder of God's loving Spirit to lead us where we ought to go and to give us the words we ought to say. When we come forward for communion and hold out our hands, let us remember that it's only through **giving up** that we can receive Christ's presence and strength. It's our only hope and the world's greatest need. Amen.