

What Are You Arguing About?

Mark 9:14-16

March 3, 2019

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My original plan was to conclude this five week series on how faith grows by looking at pivotal circumstances. A pivotal circumstance is some life event: loss of job, cancer diagnosis, divorce, car accident, infertility, or something positive, like a mission trip or the birth of a child - some event when you saw or felt the hand of God in your life. In his book, *Problem of Pain*, CS Lewis wrote: **“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”** It is not that God causes bad things to happen to us, but God can work through whatever we face to grow our faith – if we are paying attention. We all experience pivotal circumstances, even if we don’t see the hand of God in the moment.

On Monday, that’s as far as I got with this message. Then it became clear I needed to call an “audible.” You know about an audible? It’s when the quarterback sees what’s happening in front of him and instead of moving forward with what the coach wanted, he changes the play. With the action taken at our denomination’s General Conference, I suddenly felt the need to move this message in a different direction this morning. And as I prayed about what I might say, I remembered a sermon that I heard from Michael Slaughter. Forty years ago, he was appointed to a small town outside of Dayton, Ohio, serving a church that had about a dozen families left in it. But instead of closing the church, it grew to be one of the five largest United Methodist Churches in America. It is his message that shaped what I want to say this morning about this church.

First, let me say that you are an incredible church. I tell people that all of the time – and what a blessing it is for me to be one of your pastors. When I first came here, I wondered about the name – Messiah. Messiah is a Hebrew word in a community where not many people know Hebrew, but very quickly what I discovered was a church that loves Jesus, loves the teachings of Jesus, and wants to follow Jesus. Messiah means anointed one – and that’s what I felt about being part of this church –anointed in ministry as we follow the anointed one, Jesus.

So, I want to consider a passage of scripture where Jesus took three of his disciples to the top of a mountain in what we call the Transfiguration. This was a true “mountain top” experience. Have you ever had one of these? an Emmaus weekend, a spiritual retreat, or a mission trip? At the end of the weekend, you know that you’ve experienced something powerful. But you can’t stay there, and the three disciples have just had one of those experiences in which they suddenly realize that they are in the presence of the Messiah. But Jesus says, it’s time to go back and join the others. And when they reach the bottom of the mountain, Jesus finds his disciples arguing with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the religious leaders of their time. They kept the laws and practices to maintain the traditions. They followed the letter of the law of Scripture, even creating laws to help them keep these laws. Jesus had been shaking things up, and the Pharisees felt Jesus was blasphemous – messing with the traditions with behavior contrary to the will of God. So the Pharisees are arguing with the disciples, and Jesus turns, not to the Pharisees but to his own disciples and asks, **“What are you arguing about?”** Why are you arguing with them?

And I think that’s a relevant question for us in the political and religious environment in which we live. We hear the news, and everything seems to have an edge to it. Nobody seems to get along with anyone – arguing with each other. And that same spirit has entered the church, and now

the church reflects the politics of red and blue, liberal and conservative – and not the kingdom of God. We gather for worship this morning and exalt the name of Jesus and that's great but only two times in the gospels does Jesus say, "worship me." 84 times Jesus says, "follow me." I wonder if we are fans of Jesus or followers of Jesus. What are you arguing about?

The Bible makes it clear that God is the God of relationships. Over and over again, we see Jesus putting relationships above being right. There was the time when a Pharisee came to Jesus and asked, "What's the most important commandment?" There were 613 laws. Which one is most important? Is it one of the 10 that Moses gave us or something else. What's most important? And Jesus said, **You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself.** And who is my neighbor? Is it the Jewish person, the Muslim person, the non-religious, the gay person? We don't get to decide. Did you notice what Jesus did? He took two commandments and brought them together in one commandment. In other words, I can't love God if I don't love you. Loving God and Loving neighbor are interconnected. You may have a completely different perspective on life, a completely different understanding of what it says in the Bible, a completely different set of beliefs – it doesn't matter. I can't love God if I don't love you.

With all Jesus did and taught, he only gave us one new command. **I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.**" (John 13:34-35) How will the world know we are Jesus' disciples? Not by our politics, not by our church doctrines – there are over 34,000 denominations in the world – how could anyone keep them straight. How will the world know? Love – and we learn from Jesus what love looks like – unconditional, sacrificial. The world's greatest symbol of love is not the heart but the cross. Jesus gave his life for love. Jesus came to tear down the barriers that divide. No longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, conservative nor liberal. All are one in Christ Jesus.

If we go back to the mountain top with Jesus and his three disciples, a cloud descends on them and they hear the voice of God: **"This is my son whom I dearly love. Listen to him!"** I don't think it is accidental that we have these two statements in the same chapter. Jesus asks, What are you arguing about. God says, listen to him/Jesus. According to Pew Research, do you know the #1 source of news for 2/3rds of Americans? Facebook is number one – have you been reading about the problems with Facebook; number two is Twitter; number three is YouTube; and number four is Snapchat. I'm getting old. I still remember Walter Cronkite. We would watch the evening news with Walter Cronkite and he would end every broadcast – "That's the way it is." He was the most trusted man in America, because he gave us information that we could trust. But today, the news is not about information but influence. Sometimes, I'll go to several news sources just to read the different headlines. Hardly seems like the same news, because it's not information but influence. Every form of media is trying to shape our values and beliefs, how to think and how to vote. Who are you listening to?

What we allow here (ears) goes here (heart) and is projected here (mouth). Jesus said, whatever goes out of the mouth comes from the heart. Who are you listening to? Have you ever been in an argument and walked away wounded by what came from someone's mouth. What we Tweet or post defines our character. Last week, I had to give up social media because it was not redemptive. Why do we argue? We want to be right. In John's gospel, we find the story of a woman caught in adultery. The Pharisees had gathered to stone her to death. It was their right according to the law. But Jesus arrives to show that there is something more important than

being right – and he reached out to the woman – there was nothing right about that – but for Jesus relationships are more important than being right. And whenever I have a question about what to do or how to respond – for me it is what would Jesus do - and I'm going with Jesus.

My hope has been that we could be the place where it is not necessary to think alike, the place where we could read a verse of scripture and see it differently. My goal has never been to get you to believe what I believe. This is not the church of Steve. This is Messiah Church. Any question about how to treat people or who gets welcomed here – I'm going with Jesus. Maybe this week's General Conference is a pivotal circumstance after all. In a community where many have already given up on the church, they hear the news reports and drive by this building and say – not welcome there. We've got some work to do. It's a huge opportunity to prove them wrong. Oh how I want people to look at Messiah Church and say – see how they love.

In 1984, the actress Sally Fields won the best actress award for her performance in the movie, *Places in the Heart*. It's a story of what happens in a small town that was overcome with racial segregation and conflict during the depression. In the opening scene, the Sheriff who is the husband of the character played by Sally Fields, leaves the dinner table to respond to a call that results in his death when shot accidentally by a teenager. The Sheriff is white, and the teenager is black. People from the community respond by lynching and killing the teenager. Now Sally Fields is left to run the farm and attempt to bring in the cotton crop all by herself. She accepts help from a black man, and people from the community respond with hostility and attempt to destroy the farm and kill the man who is helping her. Throughout the movie, we see hurt and pain and conflict and division – until the final scene. The community has gathered for worship on a Sunday morning. Suddenly, we realize the congregation contains people both living and dead, persons estranged from each other now sit next to each other –they even serve communion to each other. The final two people that we see are the sheriff and the teenager who shot him and as the teenager receives the communion cup from the sheriff, he says, "The peace of God."

[video].

That's what kingdom of God values look like. Everyone welcome at the table. The place where relationships matter more than being right. The place where love is the answer.

Would you pray the Prayer of St. Francis with me?

Lord make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light

And where there is sadness, joy

O divine master grant that I may

not so much seek to be consoled as to console

to be understood as to understand

To be loved as to love

For it is in giving that we receive

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life

Amen

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 3, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Most gracious and loving God, we seek your presence in the midst of whatever we are facing. For in your presence, Lord, all the sorrows and pain we face can be conquered. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you and be a message of love and compassion to the world. It is in the name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.

Monday, March 4

Scripture: Mark 9:33-35; Matthew 5:21-22

They entered Capernaum. When they had come into a house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about during the journey?" They didn't respond, since on the way they had been debating with each other about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all."

"You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, Don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell.

Observation: Jesus' disciples argued about who would rank highest in the kingdom that they thought Jesus would set up. He noticed and asked, "What were you arguing about during the journey?" He said their argument about greatness completely missed his Kingdom's point. In his Sermon on the Mount, he startlingly widened the sixth commandment's reach. Contempt, anger and words that aim to tear down and destroy others are as morally destructive as the physical act of murder, he said.

Application: What must Jesus think of the heated tone of so much of the speech we hear and fling at each other today? Why do you think it often feels satisfying to argue with and tear down the reputations of people who disagree with you or are different? Are there relationships in which you have found it possible to disagree respectfully, seeking common ground rather than "victory"? If so, how can you extend those dynamics to more of your interactions?

Prayer: Dear God, help me in all my contacts with others to focus more on what connects us than on what divides us. Help me exercise discernment in a generous, unifying spirit. Amen.

Tuesday, March 5

Scripture: James 1:19-21

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.

Observation: James, Jesus' half-brother, apparently became a Christ-follower when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). He became a widely-respected leader in the early Jerusalem church. In his short letter, he linked hasty, angry speech with "moral filth." To James, a cutting outburst was no small matter, but rather a hurtful, destructive force.

Application: Early Christians faced social rejection and legal persecution. (The historian Josephus said enemies stoned James to death in Jerusalem about 62 A.D.) Christians in those conditions must have felt like raging against people who treated them so unjustly. How does James 1:19-20 speak to you when you find yourself feeling angry and eager to denounce some person or group over a milder test of your faith? For centuries, some Christians have talked in harsh, vindictive ways about other Christians over issues like circumcision, slavery, women in ministry, and (today) same-gender marriage. How can the “humility” of which James wrote move us away from arguing and toward living out what James called “the word planted deep inside you”?

Prayer: O God, make me ever more “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.” You know that’s not my natural condition, Lord—but I know you can change me from the inside out. Amen.

Wednesday, March 6

Scripture: James 3:4-12

Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly. Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell. People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way! Both fresh water and salt water don’t come from the same spring, do they? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives? Can a grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and fresh water doesn’t flow from a saltwater spring either.

Observation: The apostle James found one speech pattern painfully ironic. “With [our tongue] we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth,” he wrote.

Application: Sociologists note that in wars, soldiers use dehumanizing names for those on the other side. It seems to become easier to kill others if we stop realizing that they are people. Have you seen similar patterns in verbal “combat” when the “bullets” are words? Have you ever become friends with a person, later found that you hold some different opinions, and realized that the insulting labels you’ve used for “those people” may not be true? What are you willing to rethink in your own use of words to help the healing of our nation?

Prayer: Lord God, when people disagree with me, sometimes I wonder where they came from. Remind me that they, like me, ultimately came from your creative heart. Help me move toward seeing them as you see them. Amen.

Thursday, March 7

Scripture: James 4:1-6

What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don’t they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? You long for something you don’t have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can’t get, so you struggle and fight. You

don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings. You unfaithful people! Don't you know that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? Or do you suppose that scripture is meaningless? Doesn't God long for our faithfulness in the life he has given to us? But he gives us more grace. This is why it says, God stands against the proud, but favors the humble.

Observation: James didn't just speak to external behaviors. He focused on their inner sources long before Freud and modern psychiatry. In his day, Romans, Jews and Samaritans fought each other - sometimes with weapons, but more often with bitter words. He challenged his readers to look inward. Conflict, he said, was (and still is) often rooted not in the noble motives we try to claim for it, but in selfish wishes for more power or wealth than others have.

Application: God longs for us to cultivate humble hearts. When disagreeing with a person, one of the humblest positions we can take is to genuinely say, "I could be wrong." This recognition (which can be hard!) reminds us that we are not the all-knowing God. When was the last time you practiced such grace-filled humility as you dealt with another person?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to tame my tongue and the inner fears and insecurities that so often set my tongue off. Help me respond to the grace you give me by living ever more humbly. Amen.

Friday, March 8

Scripture: Colossians 3:8-10

But now set aside these things, such as anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it.

Observation: The letter to the Colossians recognized a firm connection between who we are on the inside and how we speak to others. Christ-followers need to set aside anger, rage, malice, slander, obscene language and lying. The first three are attitudes, but they predictably show themselves in the harmful kinds of speech that were the last three items on the list.

Application: In his Bible commentary, William Barclay said we can turn this list's items into positive commands. The first two, he said, tell us that a Christian's speech must be KIND, and it must be PURE. How easy or hard do you find it to speak in those ways if you feel anger, rage or malice toward someone? How can we be kind in our speech even when we need to offer an honest appraisal of another person?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Paul said I should "take off" these things, as I'd "take off a garment." Help me discard anger, and the ugly speech it produces, as I would a worn-out shirt, and put on your new way of life. Amen.

Saturday, March 9

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-32

Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor because we are parts of each other in the same body. Be angry without sinning. Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need. Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth.

Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Observation: Changing our speech requires letting God change the inner sources from which our words come. Across our country and around the world we see what happens when words tear down community and set people against one another. We aim to be a community in which we “Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.”

Application: In his Bible commentary, Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “Living as a Christian demands that we grow up in our thinking: you have to learn to identify your own moods and behaviour patterns, to see which ones are going in the right direction and which ones in the wrong direction....we should regard our moods, and the speech which flows from them, as we might a strong but willful horse, which needs to be reminded frequently of the direction we're supposed to be going in.... People who are enslaved to anger and malice may think they are 'free' to 'be themselves', but they are in bondage.” When have you said words that hurt, and then thought, “Why did I say that?” What helps you to understand your feelings better to keep you from blurting out words you wish you could take back? Before you forward that e-mail, or post that sharp-tongued response on social media, are you willing to ask, “Does this give grace? Does it build up? Can I picture Jesus sending this?”

Prayer: Lord of my life, be Lord of my words. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.