

## Hearts on Fire: Tongues of Fire - Helpful or Harmful

**Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight O Lord, you who are rock, redeemer & Renewer of us all. Amen.(Ps 19:14)**

Grace and Peace be with you, dear Friends!

Perhaps you've noticed that the prayer for illumination before I share a message is consistent each week. I use this prayer with intention. This is a prayer seeking the work of the Holy Spirit to be at work within me and within all who are present to hear the Word. I seek to be filled, led and blessed with Holy Spirit, and I desire the same for you. After all, as Disciples of Christ, who wouldn't want wisdom and peace? And drawing close to God, becoming more like Christ, experiencing the work of Spirit within us, within our hearts, our minds, our hands and feet, who would turn away from such an opportunity?

In this fresh season of new beginnings, and as a gathering faith community, we are called to walk the talk as disciples ... Discipleship is a way of living with 'holy habits' as we are led by a 'Heart on Fire'. Disciples are more than followers. Disciples are participants and practioners of a life in grace. Jesus demonstrated and shared this pattern of faith and life in his public life and ministry. It is a life rooted in love and empowered by a heart on fire for the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

We are in a series, 'Hearts on Fire!' focused on the letter of James and the gospel of Mark as we explore the holy habits of discipleship which kindle within us Hearts on Fire for the Lord. Today the holy habit is focused on our use of words, both written and spoken. As disciples, how do we use our words, 'Tongues of Fire' for the building of God's kin-dom?

As was mentioned last week, the scripture readings from book of James and the gospel of Mark address the practical side of theology... walking the talk. If you'll recall, James says faithful followers act like Jesus in the

world... with compassion, kindness, mercy & justice, caring for those in need... quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...doers of the word (1:19-22). Jesus lived a 'do as I do' lifestyle, embodied his teachings, and challenged God's people to daily acts of humility, justice, and love.

Let's remember that 'holy habits', are spiritual practices (such as prayer, study of scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting and Christian Conferencing) identified by John Wesley as 'means of grace' through which we encounter, engage, and experience God's love. These 'holy habits' kindle the spark within us and guide us to live as 'doers of the word', living a life of grace. These practices open our hearts to be transformed in wisdom and in faith through the work of Holy Spirit in us, and enable us to live in peace, different than the World.

James writes this letter to hearers in 40-60ce Jerusalem. He begins, as many biblical writers do, by outlining his main concerns. James did so broadly mentioning the dangers of speech (1:13, 19, 26) in the first chapter. In today's reading (3:1-12), we hear the root of his concern: the 'world of evil' that 'contaminates our entire lives' that actually resides within us (3:6). Just as Jesus has been preaching to the people and the leaders of the day in Mark's gospel, James insists that what defiles a person isn't *out there* to avoid; rather, what defiles is within our hearts and is revealed by our words (from our mouths, in an email, or on social media).

Perhaps we can gain deeper understanding why James stated God has planted the word inside us to save us (1:21) because '*the tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell*' (3:6d).

It is critical, dear friends, that we nurture our hearts and minds with holy habits so that what comes from us is a blessing and not a tearing down of another human being who is made in God's image. Reflect on this past week for a moment: how is it with your soul - were your words hurtful or harmful?

In moving to the gospel, remember that Jesus has addressed the issue of what defiles...it is a matter of the heart and living faithfully according to Torah. Jesus models a form of 'Christian Conferencing', though he wouldn't

have called it that. Conferencing is the practice of gathering, growing in the Word, and engaging in mission & ministry. The narrative read today is a specific moment of growth, accountability, and call to action instituted by Jesus, harnessing a 'tongue of fire' for the Lord.

Jesus and the disciples have left the Gentile region of the Decapolis, crossed the Sea of Galilee, have traveled to Bethsaida (northern Galilee area), and are now in Caesarea Philippi near the headwaters of the Jordan River. Traveling about the region, Jesus has healed eyes, ears, and tongues, cast out unclean spirits, and fed thousands. Now Jesus asks questions of his disciples, 'who do people say that I am' and 'who do you say that I am?'

Words communicate our attitudes and commitments. In addition, Words cultivate or destroy relationships. Jesus offers an invitation to hear the hard truth about his mission. It is a test of identity and honesty. The disciples (Peter in particular) do not disappoint. The word of choice for Jesus is *Christ* or *Messiah* (*anointed one*). Peter understands this word to mean a deliverer from the line of David who would liberate Israel from the occupiers, the Roman Empire, by gathering military power to overthrow them.

Then Jesus re-defines the word...teaching a way different from the world: that he (*Christ, Messiah*) 'must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead' (v31). Peter rejects this concept and Jesus warns Peter that this thinking is counter to His mission to build God's kingdom on earth; anything else is aligned with Satan. (Remember the temptations in the wilderness...seeking to derail Jesus from his mission?)

Then, speaking to the crowd and the disciples, Jesus re-defines discipleship... "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." (v34). A disciple is one who re-orders their priorities and commitments to participate in the mission of Christ, the way of the cross: hardship, suffering, and self-sacrifice in the name of Christ.

The symbol of this new discipleship is the cross. Announcing this 'new thing' to the disciples and the crowds, Jesus renews his mission.

The location of this moment is Caesarea Philippi, the seat of the Roman forces in the area; a city dedicated to 'Caesar the Lord'. In this setting, Jesus is proclaimed 'the Anointed One' and defines the means of a mission involving suffering and the shape of the cross. For the Romans, the cross was an instrument of terror & shame; a tool of humiliation, agony & prolonged suffering for anyone crucified, for their family & friends. It was a punishment for slaves and political rebels.

In this very moment, in this very place, Jesus redefined the meaning of discipleship and the symbol of discipleship as a cross-shaped life.

The body of James' letter intends to re-frame the followers of Christ as agents of his mission, living differently than the world around them. We are reminded to cultivate a relationship with every person, remembering each person is a beloved and treasured 'child of God'. Any word which devalues, demeans, and dismisses any person is a rejection of Jesus' kin-dom thinking.

The call to Discipleship, taking up the cross, involves a commitment to let go of this world (its things, its ways) and participate in a life of grace (prayer, study, and action) that is prioritized with JOY and a Tongue of Fire for the Lord. Living with JOY (Jesus first, Others as Yourself) is the pattern of a faithful life. What will you do differently this week because of this Word will your words be hurtful or harmful – Tongues of fire for or against God's kin-dom?

I continue to pray daily for you (and for me) that we may live with JOY, Faith, Hope, and Love so that all may know we are Disciples of Christ with Hearts on Fire. **May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight O Lord, you who are rock, redeemer & Renewer of us all. (Ps 19:14)** May it be so. So be it. Amen.