

“Talk is cheap.” “Don’t worry about what other people think.” “It’s not what you say, it’s what you do.” “Sticks and stones.” We’ve all heard these things, and probably, most of us have said them. That makes sense, since there’s some truth to them. While some subjects are difficult to talk about, talking about things is usually easier than doing them. You can drive yourself crazy trying to change what other people think of you, especially since most people, most of the time, are thoroughly focused on themselves. When words don’t align with actions, believing the actions is usually the wiser course. I think most people would rather have other people say derogatory things about them than suffer physical injury.

And yet, our readings today have harsh words about words themselves. And they show Jesus in a strange light. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as omniscient, but Mark tells this story where he asks his disciples what other people are saying about him— something most people get a sense of without having to take a survey. And in any case, Jesus usually didn’t seem to be concerned about what other people thought of him. If anything, the Gospels show him saying and doing things on many occasions that were certain to tarnish, or destroy, his reputation.

If Jesus was trying to start a conversation with the disciples, well, things went downhill pretty quickly. By the end of the exchange, Jesus might have regretted asking the question in the first place. Peter gives the best answer so far, “You are the Messiah,” and Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” I wonder if Peter thought, “Well gee, thanks, I was only trying to help.” But Jesus had a good reason for giving that order. While if anything, mainline followers of Jesus today need to be encouraged to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, that word meant something very different in Jesus’s place and time.

A messiah was understood to be a righteous liberator, a human leader who was doing God’s will, but not God incarnate. Christians inevitably use the word messiah to refer to Jesus alone, but in his day the word could be used to describe anyone who fit the description. Many Jews in Jesus’s day had particular expectations of what the next messiah would do, but none of those expectations included the messiah experiencing rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. So Jesus had to stop Peter from spreading an idea that only would have confused the people and complicated, if not shortened, his ministry.

Peter immediately demonstrated the problem. The very idea of a messiah experiencing those things was so horrifying that Peter rebuked Jesus. Peter thought he could tell Jesus how to be Jesus!

Now we begin to see how powerful words can be. We’ve all said things we regret, and we all have things we wish we had said. Anyone who has ever been the subject of gossip, rumors, defamation, disparagement, ridicule, or ostracism knows only too well how much pain words can inflict, and how important being accepted is to human well-being. I have met people who genuinely thrive on being at odds with

society, but they are rare.

Words about Jesus are especially powerful. I'm saddened by the terrible things that false teachings about Jesus have unleashed. So many people have ignored this passage and taught things that are completely opposed to Jesus's ministry of love, grace, inclusion, and reconciliation. And for what? To gain the whole world? That hasn't worked yet. I know that Jesus will have harsh words for me for things I have done and left undone, and I'll deserve them, but I shudder to think what Jesus will say to false prophets who confused the world about Jesus's nature and used his name for evil purposes.

Jesus understood the power of speech, and used it constantly. After all, he was a preacher. John the Baptist preceded him in gathering a world-changing community through preaching, and Jesus's followers, including Peter himself, carry this tradition into the present. Political leaders, good, evil, and mediocre, usually rise to power through their command of the spoken word, and more than a few political careers have been ended with a single foolish utterance. Words can make or break careers and fortunes. Words determine whether a court of law protects or takes away property, liberty, even life.

So why would Jesus say something as harsh as "Get behind me, Satan?" to his well-meaning friend? That doesn't sound very gracious. But gracious is not a synonym for nice. Sometimes blunt, or even harsh, words are essential for getting through to someone. Even "Get behind me, Satan!" is a statement of grace, because that was what it took for Jesus to get Peter to set his mind on divine things, and setting one's mind on divine things means abiding in grace and sharing grace with others.

Part of being a Christian is wanting to be a better one, and when we try to pursue that goal, we should be aware that it includes what we say, as well as what we do. We should be mindful of our words. If we notice that our words are not advancing the kingdom of God, or expressing love of God, sustaining the weary, then we should question them. Speaking grace, sometimes boldly, sometimes at personal risk, is part of being a Christian. Speaking the words Jesus would have us speak, rather than the ones that would improve our fortunes, is part of denying ourselves.

Talk may be cheap, but words are precious. Jesus himself spoke hard truths; he wasn't afraid to invite controversy, but everything he ever said was an expression of who God is. Our aspiration should be nothing less.