Pentecost 17B. September 15, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.
Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38. "What we say matters."

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the
way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' [28]And they answered
him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'
[29]He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are
the Messiah.' [30]And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.
31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering,
and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and
after three days rise again. [32]He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside
and began to rebuke him. [33]But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked
Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine
things but on human things.'
34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become
my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
[35]For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for
my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. [36]For what will it profit them
to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37]Indeed, what can they give in return
for their life? [38]Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous
and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he
comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

The Sermon
"One text, one call, can end it all," says the highway warning sign. A church sign I saw said, "Smile if you want to see Jesus. Text while driving if you want to see him today." 😊 Just once, just one word. We know the danger and sadness of bullying by way of social media. One false rumor can harm a person, who can try desperately by way of 100 denials or good words to redeem himself, while the lie persists. It's been said that a child hears one hateful word more than 100 kind words. I think it's true for adults as well.

"FAKE NEWS!" Someone is lying: either the one who spread the news or the one who says it is fake. It is hard to know whom to believe: the spreader of the news or the accuser.

Doug does not know how to discern "fake" from "true" and thus does not know how to vote for the person and policies he really supports.

Mary does not know how to explain her position to her friend because the "facts" are not clear to either of them.

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A woman comes to her pastor and confesses she has started an unkind rumor which has provoked gossip in the congregation. She asks how she can do penance for this sin. The pastor tells her to take a sack of feathers and place one feather on the doorstep of every church member and to come back tomorrow. The next morning she comes back. Now, he says, take your sack and collect all the feathers up again.

The woman despairs because the feathers have all blown away. The good pastor doesn't leave her hanging in guilt. There can be forgiveness, he says, for untrue, unkind, uncivil words, but there is no way to take them back. Best leaving them unsaid.

What we say, what we text, what we write… matters. Our lesson from the book of James today is "right on" where we read, "no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

When we proclaim in the Creed that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead, we don't fear God's judgment. We DO trust God's heart of forgiveness. But that phrase in the Creed reminds us that what we DO and SAY matters.

I could stop here and we'd all have a good life lesson about careless speech – not to mention texting while driving.

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But we also have a Gospel lesson this morning. There were lots of "fake Messiahs" in Jesus' time and in the years when Mark was writing Jesus' story. Today's reading includes what we call "Peter's great confession" and it is the turning point of Mark's book.

Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is. John the Baptist, Elijah. No. Then Jesus asks them who <u>they</u> think he is, to which Peter replies, "You are the Messiah." Matthew remembers Peter answering, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

A profound profession of faith!

Then Jesus begins to talk about dying. Peter is horrified. But Peter didn't listen to the whole sentence. Jesus said he would be killed and after three days rise again. Peter only heard the killing part and tries to set Jesus straight: we do not want you to die. Jesus says that Peter's mind is set on human things, not divine things.

Another hard word. To live life in today's world, most of us DO set our minds on human things. We strive for success, for wealth, good grades, lots of friends, parties, good things. I do that, you do that, we encourage our kids to do that.

So what do we make of Jesus' next words, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it"?

Sadly, in some parts of the world, some Christians ARE losing their lives because of their faith. Many lost lives in the early days of the church. German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that when Christ calls a person, Christ calls that person to die. He was willing to lay down his life for what he believed to be Christ's call to oppose Hitler's killing machine and was indeed executed for his resistance.

I fear that many are losing their lives because they have NO faith.

Some church leaders and seminarians today believe that the church as we know it will lay down its life for the sake of the Gospel and that God's holying Spirit will raise it up in a new way.

We are fortunate that we likely won't need to die physically for the sake of the Gospel. But what do Jesus' words then mean for us?

Jesus is saying that a life focused on success, popularity, good health and earthly things, is not real LIFE, not true LIFE, not full LIFE. He invites us to stop depending on these things, for they will never be enough and they can disappear in a moment.

Once we lose the life of dependence on earthly things, once we DIE to them, we fall into the arms of God's love. What a place to land! We now focus on loving God back in gratitude and on caring for our neighbor. This is real LIFE, a life focused in love for God and neighbor.

NOW, if we do find success, gain wealth, have fun, enjoy nice things, that is something we are grateful for – but not our life's focus. And if we lose success,

wealth, our things, we are not ruined. For either way our focus is on God's love. Either way God's love surrounds us. Either way we have real LIFE.

This is the word spoken over you each morning when you rise: God loves you, God leads and guides you today. God blesses your work, your worries, your struggles, your joys, your sorrows – just as Jesus did when he walked this earth. In all that you face, you are blessed.

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"Who is Jesus for us today?" Many of you would say, "the son of God," "my Lord and Savior," or "the one who strengthens me" or "my best friend." We may also like to think of him as brother, teacher, companion on the journey.

Jesus Christ is a comfort for those who struggle with faith and for those with strong faith, for those who pray for help, who face tough decisions and hope to do God's will, for those who know they cannot comprehend the majesty of God. Jesus lives in the places of the cross: in refugee camps and detention centers, in dark corners of abuse and tragedy, in hospital emergency rooms, at the side of those suffering great loss. He travels today with first responders and people fleeing flood and storm.

The tongue, where we started today, is God's gift for proclaiming truth – whether in person or with our phones or social media. When living the blessed, beloved life as God's child, there is no room for nasty texts, foolish words, mean-spirited rants, insults, lies. No room at all.

There is no fake news here today. Only good news: the Gospel love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: the one who walks before us in LIFE through death to LIFE. Good news indeed! Amen.