

GENESIS 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

PSALM 45:10-17

ROMANS 7:15-25a

MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost; Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 9, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Was That Meant to Be a Compliment?

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!” We have all heard that nonsense at some point in our lives. And the farmer hauled another load away because we all know that words can leave a mark, they can hurt, they can do injurious damage, they can sting, words matter. Perhaps we were subjected to ridicule as children who were victimized by painful bullying and name calling. And as we all know all too well, some words stick even when they are not true! They can leave an ugly residue! We all remember the hilarious but toxic presidential debate from 2016, the soon to be name-caller in chief having no filters, taking no prisoners as he belittled his rivals. “Little” this! “Sleepy” that! “Low energy” here, there, and everywhere! How “sanctimonious!” Wow, a multisyllabic word! Five syllables! Awesome! We would probably just as soon forget! Words have power, even words that are false, inaccurate, outright lies, labels that carry the sad day of alternative facts, fake news. Words are a gift when honestly used to convey truth, when spoken to uplift people, to affirm, to embrace and encourage, to support in life’s trying and successful moments. Words are a curse when they are used as such! I speak as someone who is a lover of words, as you are all painfully aware, yes, probably on occasion too much so! Tell it all, Tim! Words have power because they are powerful, conveying meanings far deeper than the mere letters that comprise them. Every book, including our Bible, is a book of words. And speaking of the Bible, it is full of words that are demonically damning, damaging, and detrimental, as well as graciously loving, merciful and peaceful, yes, a mixed bag of verbiage. As my friend Jill Bierwirth says, “the Bible can be used as a weapon or as a welcome!” We get to choose! We get to pick every time we pick up the

good book and pick a verse from our version of a holy book. A girlfriend from many years ago used to implore me, “listen to my words,” obviously making the point that I did not! Yes, language matters! Vocabulary matters! Words matter! And some words matter more than others!

In today’s Gospel lection from Matthew, we read that Jesus is once again teaching and preaching to the crowds, a practice that is most familiar to us purveyors of biblical content. We are accustomed to reading these profound things in the Gospels. Nothing new here! It is obvious, based on a larger reading than the limited lectionary narrative we find before us today, that Jesus needed to do some venting. Perhaps he was having a bad day, was in a bad mood. Like all us humans, he was entitled! Jesus was purported to have given this warning, promising his radical followers that for the sake of his and God’s gospel that a day was surely coming when family would fight against family. Jesus then named a bunch of familial scenarios to back up his threatening promise, a claim that would come to pass in the short term of time as traditional Jews and Jesus-following-Jews acrimoniously split for good, uh, bad! The only thing worse than a civil war is a religious one, or perhaps both combined! Jesus then reminded the gathering about the unfortunate fate suffered by his cousin John who lost his head as he dared to be the prophet who is first credited with proclaiming Jesus’ arrival on the scene. Yes, there was a heavy price to pay for being the lone ranger, the one whose voice cried in the wilderness, a preacher no doubt frustrated that many who heard his proclamation still chose to ignore his words, brushing off the bold witness this camel-haired, bug-eating, harbinger of Christ proclaimed. Speaking of name calling, “Brood of vipers!” John T. took no prisoners!

Jesus, perhaps surprisingly in our reading today, turns up the heat a notch in an unbridled diatribe comprising today’s Gospel lection. The presumably meek and mild mannered one goes off script, a bit rogue, sounding a lot like his forerunner cousin, accelerating from preaching to meddling, complaining about and condemning everyone within earshot, throwing the gathered masses under the proverbial bus, holding back nothing in this fiery speech. The rabbi recites a not-so-innocent rhyme that evidently children knew well from memory and perhaps said or sung with a playful but serious rhythmic cadence, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance! We wailed, and you did not mourn!” As we know, Jesus was obviously the life of the party, a regular rabbinical party animal.

After all, it was said about Jesus that he was the gifted and talented man who once saved the day and a wedding reception as he made a surplus of wine for a three-day party after the first and God knows how many rounds was gone. Yes, the poor steward affirmed the miracle, having unforgivingly given out of the good stuff and Jesus, presto, like magic, made a new batch even after everyone was totally sauced. By that time no one could have known the difference between good wine, Mogen David, or grape juice! What a gift to have Jesus at your party—momma said! Jesus was obviously annoyed and frustrated because so many of his own failed to come to the party, his party, God’s party, no RSVP necessary. Whatever limited information we have about Jesus and his disciples, one thing is certain based on not even a close reading of the Gospels, and that is that he and his entourage frequented the party scene, making the rounds with anyone who extended an invitation to their home. Yes, he was, and still is, the life of the party. Let’s party like it is year one, the clock striking midnight ushering in a new era in the first century! Who knew? We are known by our deeds, remembered for our actions. In Luke’s Gospel alone we find Jesus in a variety of settings, finding him at home in the homes of those you did not dare deign to go, ready and willing to tell his story to anyone who would listen. Don’t ever find yourself at old you-know-whats Zacchaeus’ house! Oops! There he was! As one New Testament commentator observes, “You can literally eat your way through Luke’s Gospel.” And I would add drink through it as well! Well, as we know full well, we are known by our actions and Jesus was known to be a “glutton and a drunkard!” Ouch! And perhaps to a degree he was, knowing that this public propensity is hard to measure! One person’s excess is another person’s near “teetotality,” made up word! I guess you know public intoxication when you see it!

Interestingly enough, at least as far as the text tells us, Jesus does not deny his preference to eat and drink and enjoy the company of tax collectors and sinners, folks who surely were a lot more hospitable, a lot more fun than the uppity, stodgy, narcissistically arrogant religious leaders whose hypocrisy, by virtue of their presence at these social soirées, was palpable, yes, overwhelming. The Bible tells us so! Like birds of a feather, outsiders or others certainly relate to one another’s plight! If these piously pompous pontificators were not present for all these festivities, they would not have been privy to the goings on, would have never seen what took place at said parties! Duh! Yes, Jesus enjoyed the company

of the common folks, the everyday woman and man. As someone once poetically wrote, his self-appointed adversaries were “hoist by their own petard!” Indeed, we are known by the company we keep! But this is not so much a sermon about Jesus’ picky sparring partners, per se, but is about the reasons he was labeled in such a critically negative way, and more importantly, the way he responded, no reactionary vitriol in his sobering recourse, his subtle redirect.

The first observation is somewhat subtle in that evidently Jesus never returned fire, never reacted with verbal salvos, but instead brushed them off, never lowering himself to those who shrank to name calling, Jesus having no need to match their insults. Oh, wait a minute! He does do that elsewhere, “Dog, fool, blind guide, hypocrite!” Everyone has their breaking point! Jesus had his like we all have ours! It is apparent, however, that Jesus did not let them get the best of him. He never seemed flustered, overly concerned about the various insulting labels hurled his way. Perhaps we need to rethink this text and Jesus’ response. Perhaps he wore these labels as a badge of honor, a source of pride, not just that he successfully managed to get under his adversaries’ thin skin, but that he knew they got his point and got it fully. The authority figures knew full well they had convicted themselves, a bunch of blowhard men guilty as charged, proving not only Jesus’ theories about their character, but about “it”, the very nature of the gospel. But in today’s lection everybody gets slammed, no exceptions! No one gets a pass! It is obvious that Jesus was frustrated, even angry, because it seemed that his constituents were not hearing his words. The rabbi was delivering a better way, the best way, fueled by the correct understanding, what he truly perceived was the true interpretation of traditional Judaism. Perhaps if we are not being labeled, razzed and called names, we might not be trying hard enough! Maybe, just maybe, being called out, getting wanted or unwanted attention, in what seems to be such a negative way is actually the opposite from what it appears, a positive statement about our prophetic witness, a testimony to what we believe is our testimony, the faith that motivates, that drives our passion and our persona as we live and move and have our being. And yes, let us go ahead and acknowledge that the reverse also holds true regarding the opposition, the same principle applying to those who are polar opposites on the biblical, social, political, and theological scale from where we stand. Fair is fair! They have a right to their opinion, including their opinion about us! They have the right to be wrong if they so choose!

One of the overarching realities revealed in the Gospels is a much-needed reminder, that Jesus was a very political figure. He was a community organizer, an activist! He stirred the pot! To use a John Lewis image, Jesus caused “good trouble!” Yes, it is not only what got him called every name in the book, plus some, no doubt, but also what got him killed, executed by the Romans, crucified, the worst execution available, because he was condemned, convicted, as a not-so-common criminal, a traitor to the state, an insurrectionist leading a peasant revolt who gained the attention, the notoriety, of the Roman government. No one gets the worst treatment by making commentary on Torah, an expected part of being known as a rabbi. Somehow in the Church’s lore, down through the centuries, Jesus’ rough edges have been smoothed, and he has been politely remolded as a passively timid individual, a meek and mild-mannered preacher and teacher, taking on the form of a guru or shaman, speaking in quiet and hushed tones. Jesus was certainly a pacifist but in no way was he passive, demur to the point of timidity, the very antithesis of humility born of the confidence of delivering a relevant message. Yes, the ironies are numerous and transparent.

Many years ago, as I pastored what was then the Virginia-Highland Baptist Church as I led the congregation through dismissal, its disfellowshipping, call it kicked out, thrown from the train, from the Georgia Baptist Convention, me and the congregation were called many unflattering things. I was called the “antichrist” on more than one occasion during these halcyon days. According to a listener at the height of the controversy, I was called by James Dobson on his Focus on the Family (focus on your own family) radio show, among “the most dangerous men in America,” a laughable idea. The church where Jill serves as Intentional Interim is catching hell on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, major pushback, because they have dared to suggest with help from their prophetic youth, that trans people matter, matter to God and matter to those who are sympathetic to their struggles. From my understanding we too here at First Congregational United Church of Christ have been given some labels intended to be insults, the “rainbow church” for example, but these digs have been received as accolades, compliments telling this congregation that it is on the right track. And do not think that our beloved denominational affiliate, the United Church of Christ, has not received more than its fair share of insulting verbiage all because it stands with the oppressed in every form that human oppression reveals its ugly self. Yes, what would Jesus do? Well,

the answer is found in what he did, and we know from our reading of the biblical narrative in the Gospels exactly what he did and with and to whom. I never cease to be amazed that this stuff, this Godly stuff, is still up for debate when it is right in front of everyone in black and white and sometimes red. There is no gray!

Perhaps and probably the most subtle line in this morning's Gospel lection is what Jesus has to say after unloading his complaint at the annoying crowd. It is subtle to a degree and almost hidden, no doubt overlooked with a quick reading. After all Jesus' lamenting the accusations and name calling, the rabbi simply says, "But wisdom is proved to be right by her works!" Part of the crises we are facing as the Church, the nation, and our world is that there is far too little wisdom in the offing and far too much, a whole lot of stupid. And stupid is as stupid does. As Blue-Collar comedian Ron White says in his profanity laced stand up act, "You can't fix stupid!" It is clear that Jesus recognized mass stupidity for what it was, and he could not fix it either. Think about it for a moment, wisdom is proven by our works!" Once again belief is put on a shelf, a side burner! Jesus' concern is about what we do, and we only do what meets gospel criteria when we do with and for others, meeting the challenge of fulfilling a call and commitment to giving cups of cold water, feeding, quenching, clothing, and visiting. The refrain is an echo that continues to ring, to sing like a glorious song, throughout Jesus' mission and ministry. In the meantime, despite his agitation at what he must have perceived to be a most fickle crowd, Jesus shows his usual self, full of care, comfort, and compassion for the masses, imploring one and all to "Come to me, all you are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke and learn from me. I am gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden light." Perhaps this was more than an acknowledgment, but a confession of sorts, that in the final analysis, Jesus knew that this crowd was doing the best, the most, it could do under very trying circumstances, the limited and the maximum capacity of those he was trying so desperately to reach. He knew it then! He knows it now!

A major part of our dilemma centers around our demur demeanor, our decorum as Christians, leading, or following, with a cautionary politeness because we are at odds in a larger family squabble within Christianity, our hopelessly naïve desire to mend fences and build bridges even knowing that this exercise in futility is a game of make believe, a losing game of let's pretend. In my estimation today's lection is

a reminder that we are to take our cue from Jesus and let the proverbial chips fall where they may as we boldly, courageously, declare what we believe it means to follow the man from Nazareth and give witness to his gospel, to engage and embrace all people no matter. **There is only one correct side in our larger ecclesial debates and that side is to side with the poor, all those who live on the fringes of society, the dispossessed, disenfranchised, and marginalized, every time, all the time. This calling is not a progressive or liberal thing, a conservative or fundamentalist thing! It is a social justice thing, a Jesus thing, a gospel thing! Our job one and following is to hospitably welcome and include the folks Jesus went out of his way to encounter and engage as he sought to bring them into his sphere of being, his expanding circle of love, as he strived to assure these vulnerably compromised that they were not only invited somewhere on the guest list, but that they were special, VIPs with reservations at the head of the table at the great banquet feast in God's realm. Yes, this is the nature, the litmus, of our work, the proof of our faithful pudding! Yes, they were to be given the seats of honor wrongly assumed for those who seemed to be inherently imbued with power, prestige, and privilege, religiously entitled and inclined silver spoon trust babies all. No one buys their way into the realm of God! No one earns it, but ironically it certainly requires an immense effort, a lot of work here on the earthly version. When all is said and done, may we find ourselves on the right side of history, the right side of Jesus, never doubting, as Paul confessed and apparently frequently did, that we did not do that which we desire to do, the things we ought to have done, that we were guilty of doing that which we did not want to do, the thing we despised, that we hated most. May we do what we know in our hearts and minds as followers of Jesus to be the right thing to do, the things we should do, the baseline expectation required for living this gospel. As Paul says, "The desire to do good is inside us all. . ."**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and calls us a host of endearing terms including the beloved! Amen and amen.

