

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

**September 12, 2021**

**Psalm 116:1–9 (ESV):**

#### **I Love the Lord**

116 I love the LORD, because he has heard  
my voice and my pleas for mercy.

2 Because he inclined his ear to me,  
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

3 The snares of death encompassed me;  
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;  
I suffered distress and anguish.

4 Then I called on the name of the LORD:  
“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”

5 Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;  
our God is merciful.

6 The LORD preserves the simple;  
when I was brought low, he saved me.

7 Return, O my soul, to your rest;  
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

8 For you have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling;

9 I will walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living.

**First Reading: Isaiah 50:4–10 (ESV):**

4 The Lord GOD has given me  
the tongue of those who are taught,  
that I may know how to sustain with a word  
him who is weary.

Morning by morning he awakens;  
he awakens my ear  
to hear as those who are taught.

5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious;  
I turned not backward.

6 I gave my back to those who strike,  
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;  
I hid not my face  
from disgrace and spitting.

7 But the Lord GOD helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like a flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

8 He who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who is my adversary?

Let him come near to me.

9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;

who will declare me guilty?

Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;  
the moth will eat them up.

10 Who among you fears the LORD  
and obeys the voice of his servant?

Let him who walks in darkness  
and has no light

trust in the name of the LORD  
and rely on his God.

**EPISTLE: James 3:1–12 (ESV):**

**Taming the Tongue**

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 4 Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

### **THE GOSPEL - Mark 9:14–29 (ESV):**

#### **Jesus Heals a Boy with an Unclean Spirit**

**14** And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. **15** And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. **16** And he asked them, **“What are you arguing about with them?”** **17** And someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. **18** And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able.” **19** And he answered them, **“O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.”** **20** And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. **21** And Jesus asked his father, **“How long has this been happening to him?”** And he said, “From childhood. **22** And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him.

But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” **23** And Jesus said to him, “‘If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.” **24** Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!” **25** And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” **26** And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” **27** But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. **28** And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” **29** And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

### **Sermon 37 – Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

#### **“Misbehaving Tongues”**

#### **James 3:1-12**

Dear friends,

The epistle of James is often misunderstood, I don't hear that too much among you so I'll just mention it briefly in a second. Here he deals with the tongue, and the sins of the tongue, very common sins that afflict us all. As always, though, the lessons are found not just in what he says, but in how he gets there. It keys into what James is all about, which is walking the talk, putting your actions where your faith is. This is good, and pleasing to God our Father, it occasionally confuses because of its black-and-white nature, but God is very much that way and we are very much not. We all know that doing things is not what gets us to heaven. Doing things is not why God saves us. We all know that doing things is still important. James reminds us of the relationship between our good deeds and our faith, what these things have to do with each other, how dependent they are on each other. Furthermore, James makes time for some simple lecturing, which I will do as well, so get ready for that.

Again, James wrote this letter to get people to shape up and act like Christians. It is that simple. Every part of the Scripture teaches us about Jesus, James has plenty to say

on that score, but James' goal was to get people to stop being so lazy and so careless about what they did. This is why Paul and James sound so different. Paul is largely writing to people who need to hear about Jesus and His death for them. James is writing to people who got lazy with that, who decided for whatever reason that what they did wasn't important. They weren't watching their behavior. We Christians need both throughout our lifetime. Sometimes, we need to be reassured that Jesus still loves us, still forgives us, we need to hear that it wasn't all a waste of time. Sometimes, we need to be thumped over the head and told to do the thing. You're Christians. Do your Christian thing. Love your neighbor. God is watching. James is doing that part.

**“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.”** James highlights the impossibility of the task. I have a big mouth, and it talks ahead of my brain, something all of you have personal experience with by now. Words are all I have ever had, yet despite this, my words have always had mixed results. Some of my words are good. A lot of them are not. You are the same. Typically, our response is a bit of laughter at this, shaking our heads together at that very human tendency to talk before we think, and say something careless, hurtful, and stupid. We laugh because we've all done it.

That doesn't make it okay. It doesn't at all. It's still us being non-Christian. It's us giving in to the sinner that is inside all of us. We can say we're sorry, and God forgives us, typically those around us do too, but it's still sin. James goes on and reminds us of that pale fact. **“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”** Hell. James brings us back down to earth. A loose tongue is a hellish thing. What a way to put it! Hell

is nothing to laugh at, and our tongues, our careless speech, is like letting loose a little bit of hell upon those around us. That should shame us.

It doesn't seem that way. Everyone loses their temper, flies off the handle, tells a lie, or makes a careless joke. Everyone is guilty of spreading a rumor, either on purpose or no. Our sins of our tongues are a great reminder to us of how deceptive sin can be. It's so easy to think that this is normal, that this is ok, because we all do it. Even if its not okay, its not all that bad either, how can it be? James reminds us that evil is evil, no matter how common it is, no matter how harmless it seems. He tells us that all sin, every lie, every careless insult, every cutting word, is from the devil, a bit of hell itself in our flesh. Again, we are comfortable with gray, because we live in a gray world. We're gray people, at least that's how we think of ourselves. We're good people that make mistakes, we're alright most of the time even if we behave badly. That's deluded, and James breaks through here. Evil is evil. Good is good. Good is not evil, evil is not good. We are one or the other. Half a rotten onion is a rotten onion. This kind of extreme black-and-white is how God operates, and its a way that seems too harsh, too stark, for us. It makes us uncomfortable because we know we're not that way. But God's words here stand. We shouldn't do any of this stuff. We should be able to control our mouths, we should be able to do good all the time, but we can't.

Don't get too comfortable with that. Sin isn't a friend. Sin isn't a joke. It is true blue genuine evil, as wicked as everything that antagonizes us. We're lulled into a false sense of security by how impossible it is to truly be good all the time, but that's God's expectation. Be good. All the time. When you don't, your faith suffers, your witness suffers, and the people around you suffer too. **“9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12 Can a fig tree,**

**my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”**

We know we're sinners and saints, but never forget what a sinner is. The walking dead, an outpost of hell, a fountain of evil. Hurtful. Nasty. Salt ponds cannot yield fresh water, just ask Salt Lake City. We are what we do, and what we do speaks so truly as to what we are.

So what do we do? Repent, as always, never losing sight of what we really are and how much of God's grace we really need. Our sin is so very great, and James shines a harsh light on that. We know we're not murderers, our sins seem like small potatoes next to the big sinners we all know about. But our tongues... James manages to get us all where we all stumble.

Luther teaches us a wonderful lesson in the Small Catechism. In his explanation, he tells us that we should defend our neighbor, speak well of our neighbor, and explain everything in the kindest way. What a wonderful description. Explain everything in the kindest way. Find the good things to say about it. Find the way to see the good in it, and then say that. Take the person you find least agreeable in life, and find something good to say about them. Say something good about them, and mean it. It's a good exercise for our Christian faith, and nice reminder of what Christ must do for us.

Jesus forgives us our sins, gives us a new start, and James tells us that this means something. It means something for who we are and how we behave. So let us behave as the new people we know we are, we know we can be, let us strive to loose our tongues of their bad habits. We live in a world surrounded by lies, and we are supposed to be true. We live in a world of cutting people down, sarcastic remarks, much evil of the tongue. Let's be different. God made us different. We can do it because He does it for us.

I'm not pointing fingers here, I'm not saying this because I've noticed something different in you. I'm not even saying it to just you, I'm saying it to all of us, and sometimes we Christians need to take a collective breath and remember what this is all about. This

is not about the evil of the world, though it has plenty of it. This is not about them. This is about our everyday wickedness, our everyday failings, and if you're like me you lose sight of how culpable you are. I certainly do. I know I'm a Christian and I know Christ saves me. James tells us exactly what Christ saves us from, the sins we actually commit, we do them, and how these things are not worthy of us. We're better than this. Let's be better than this. Let's use our tongues for truth, for praising God, for explaining everything in the kindest way. Let our Christian love show from our mouth, from what we say, and let us try to get a tourniquet on the wickedness that so often comes out. We can. Christ has given us control, given us agency, freedom to choose the right course. Freedom to be righteous. What a wonderful gift.

Amen