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Listening, Speaking, Acting

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Scriptures: Prov. 1:20-33; James 3:1-6, 13-18; Mark 9:33-35; Mark 8:27-38

It's back to school now for all our children, youth and young adults at CEGEP or University, and I'm sure the euphoria of those first few days back is starting to fade as learning begins and homework starts piling up. Does anyone here remember those days, oh, maybe back a few years ago? You're off to school in your spit-shiny new shoes and clothes, or at least the best hand-me-downs then available from an older brother or sister? There were new kids to meet, old friends with whom to reconnect. Did you know who your homeroom teacher would be? Did you like him or her? Did they have a reputation for being strict, or easy, or kind? And the changes! Every year it seemed the ground was shifting. Everyone was a little bit older, and dare we hope, a bit wiser? But we continue to hear about bullies, and kids coming back from day 1 with tears in their eyes rather than excitement at so much to learn and new community created. What a shame that for too many kids, school is something you have to endure because the popular kids are too insecure to bring along the shy or different kids. For all of us, school was often our first step beyond the confines of our families and a chance to learn

about how the world works in the rough and tumble social world of our peers – each one likely as scared or excited or nervous or confused as the next.

Funny – because to me it sounds a bit like the world of the disciples walking the back roads of Capernaum, and Caesarea Philippi with Jesus. And maybe, with James in mind, it sounds a bit like our world when we get a little too comfortable in our pecking orders or cliques to help others, newcomers, different ones become part of our circles of caring. There they were, young men who should have known better, arguing over who among them would be the greatest! Had they listened to anything Jesus had been teaching them, or more than that, showing them, by how he lived? If it weren't so schoolyardish a bragging session, we might forgive them because they were likely not that old – teenagers, early 20s maximum. In those days, however, you had to grow up fast. And considering the reaction of their teacher, they clearly were going to end the day taking a big F for failure, again. Mark's gospel is wonderful, or terrible, that way. The disciples are always getting a grade well below a C. They fail again and again, which is terrible. But Jesus, he never gives up on them, and keeps on hoping, teaching, demonstrating how to give themselves away and by doing so discover who they really are, and who he really is.

You might protest that Peter should get an A, right? He answered correctly what Mark wanted his listeners to believe – that in Jesus we find none other than the Messiah, the Christ! But when Peter takes Jesus aside to tell him “no Jesus, don't teach us about suffering, and crosses, and death, Jesus realizes his message isn't getting through. Faith is not arguing about who is the greatest! It's about how to be humble in the face of all your faults. How to save your life by putting other people first some of the time and not always putting yourself first. He seemed to know that that is what we do if we're left to ourselves too much. We get big heads, rather than open hearts. We use what power we have to one-up over someone else, to divide people rather than bring them together, to gossip behind someone's back rather than love and include them for Christ's sake.

In this back to school time, it's our challenge perhaps to reflect on how we're doing, even give ourselves a grade, in what James would call "the tongue department." We know from the last few weeks that James is critical of people who call themselves Christian and yet are all talk and little action. Perhaps James knew of communities in his time that were filled with people simply who had never gotten the memo of how their words and actions could so easily cause harm to another. Like Jesus, James doesn't mince words either, calling the tongue like a fire first lit in Hell – can you imagine! Like the bit in a horse's mouth, or the tiny rudder that nevertheless steers a large boat, the author puts us on notice – engage not just brain, but heart, and compassion before you open your mouth to say anything! Friends, this is a hard message this morning. It means we need to rethink everything we say, and do, so that when we listen, speak and act, we do so not from our authority or self-interest alone, but also from a place of deep wisdom and experience born beyond our own experience in the crucible of God's love, a love that goes to the Cross and beyond for you, for me, and for the world.

In a few moments we'll sing another hymn text I wrote a few years back that paints Sophia, or Lady Wisdom, in the same mold as Jesus or the author of James, as they try seemingly in vain to get our attention. In this proverbial image of God from ancient Judaism, the divine's feminine aspect is cast in the role of Wisdom itself – a life lived in alignment with the law of love. Only problem, despite Lady Wisdom crying out on the streets for people to turn from selfish folly to true wisdom, no one is listening! Her threatening to turn her back on the people seems to move no one, and yet, she continues to cry out, "come, be wise, live humbly, full of compassion, and you will truly live."

So let us pray for all those going back to school, and for their teachers, that they and we will actively try to model a wisdom born from above as we mature as girls and boys, women and men. James promises his listeners that to those who can hear the message and make the switch, a new serenity and peace will be gained. He teaches that "the wisdom from above" leads us toward words and actions that are "pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to

yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (James 3:17) Doesn’t that sound wonderful? Doesn’t that sound like the world we pray for each Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer – that “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?”

Thank God that God doesn’t expect us to be perfect in this. Even if we try our hardest to remember, and yet still get failing grade again and again, our God revealed by Christ will stay with us, prodding, goading, teaching, demonstrating, loving, until the word begins to sink in. That is our task too, to let go of self so that God might be experienced by the ways we humbly, imperfectly offer such grace to others. When we do that, the grace you give often comes back a hundred-fold. Picture yourself walking into the schoolyard, and a circle of kids opens to include you in the game, each one a potential new friend. It’s enough to get your toe a tapping as you skip merrily home from school, or dare I say from church, am I right?!

May we each taste of such mature faith, and such glorious living! Amen.