

Today's reading from the letter of St James is from a larger section which is addressed to people who might feel called to be teachers. The Jews had great respect for teachers. Our society needs to have more respect for teachers. However, in this section of his letter, James warns his readers: "Not many of you should become teachers, for you realize that we will be judged more strictly, for we all fall short in many respects." Teaching the faith to the young and the inexperienced is a high calling, but those who are called to teach will be held to a high standard. With great power comes great responsibility. James is warning those who would teach that they need to be aware that the price of failure could be high. That might not be the best message to send on the weekend when we are honoring our Catechists for catechetical Sunday but the church is placing great trust in catechists to form her children in the ways of the faith. I'm sure you will all do great jobs though and thank you for taking on this important vocation.

James' concern with teachers is related to the dangers associated with the power of speech. This section of his letter is full of warnings and even though it was not included in the cycle of readings we have heard from James, I want to talk about it a little bit. It applies to each one of us, regardless of whether or not we are teachers. James was very concerned with the power of speech. With great power comes great responsibility and the way we use our words can do great good or cause great harm. Let me share with you a little of what James wrote: "No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing." If James were writing this letter today, he would certainly include electronic forms of communication such as email and social media.

There are all sorts of directions I could go with this, but I am going to focus on one sin of speech which many of us just sort of pass off as being no big deal: gossip. Here is what the book of Sirach says about gossip: "Cursed be gossips and the double-tongued, for they destroy the peace of many." Moral theologians will often place gossip under one of two commandments: the eighth and fifth commandments, lying and murder. When we engage in gossip, it is very easy to stretch the truth or state things in a way that doesn't accurately represent the truth; that is lying. Gossip is also murder because it can destroy a person's good reputation. Even when what we are sharing is the truth, we often gossip about things that don't need to be shared. And once we say something we have no control

over what the next person does with it. Gossip has the potential to break two commandments; we need to treat it as a more serious sin than we typically do.

What is it that drives gossip, especially the most vicious types of gossip? Could it possibly be jealousy and selfish ambition? Don't we often gossip to make others appear less and to make ourselves greater? Don't we often do it out of resentment for another's good fortune? Or maybe we just do it to stir up trouble because we like conflict. Saint James addresses this in his letter. He considers jealousy and selfish ambition as types of wisdom...but this isn't a type of wisdom we should be proud of: "If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. Wisdom of this kind does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic."

The devil is sometimes referred to as the divider. He was motivated by envy. When we act out of envy and selfish ambition, caring only for our own personal good without a thought for what is good for others, we are following the path of the devil. When we gossip about others out of jealousy or selfish ambition or just because we want to stir up trouble--we are being little devils.

James tells us today: "where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice." Then he asks: "Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war." When we follow the wisdom of the devil, the jealous one, the selfishly ambitious one...when we spread gossip and slander and drag others down to build up our pride...how can we expect anything other than wars and conflict?

In this same letter, James gives us the antidote to earthly wisdom: heavenly wisdom. "Wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity." This type of wisdom is expressed by living good lives. We don't just tell people how wise we are, we demonstrate our wisdom by the way we live our lives. Heavenly wisdom--of course--is perfectly illustrated by Jesus.

Jesus shows us true wisdom. Jealousy and selfish ambition are about putting ourselves first. Jesus says that if we want to truly be great in the kingdom of God, we have to become servants, we have to put the needs of others first. He's not telling us to neglect ourselves; he's telling us to love our neighbor as ourselves...to treat one another as we ourselves would like to be treated. He demonstrates this by

putting his arms around a child saying: “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.” To receive a little one is to accept, lovingly serve, and care for those who most need it and cannot repay it. To receive “in Jesus’ name” is to welcome such a person for the sake of Jesus and in deference to him. Jesus identifies with those who are most insignificant in the eyes of the world—so much so that he himself is mysteriously present wherever they are welcomed. Service to the littlest among us according to the wisdom of Heaven counteracts the wisdom of the devil and allows us to help Jesus make heaven on earth a reality.

As we prepare to receive the true body and blood of our Lord in Holy Communion, let us ask him to drive out the wisdom of the devil and replace it with the wisdom of heaven.