

The Body of Christ: The Mouth of Christ Lent 2011

Our Lenten series at Grace, Nazareth, and Bethlehem Lutheran Churches this year is focused on “The Body of Christ.” However, we’ll be considering the subject in a way you may never have considered. The Scripture speaks much of the Body of Christ.

It directs our attention to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross when He willingly gave His body over to the scourge and thorn, and finally to be nailed to a cross to take the punishment in His own body for all of our sins.

Three days later we see the Body of Christ striding triumphant from the tomb, resurrected, alive nevermore to die.

The Gospel writers and Paul speak eloquently to us of the Body of Christ offered to us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, that mystery we accept by faith without fully comprehending.

And the New Testament speaks of the Holy Christian Church, the assembly of all believers, in heaven and on earth, as the Body of Christ.

During this Lenten season, however, we want to focus on the Body of Christ in a somewhat different way – one might even say a more clinical way. We will consider the different parts of Jesus’

body – how He used them and what message they speak to us today.

It is my privilege to speak to you tonight about the mouth of Jesus. I must confess that it is a part of Jesus' body that I have not given much thought to. I've thought, of course, of Jesus' head, which bore the crown of thorns, and of His hands and feet, which were pierced with nails on the cross. I've thought of His feet, as well, in the context of His washing of His disciples' feet, of how dusty they probably became each day of walking throughout Israel. I've considered His eyes as they engaged the eyes of people to whom He was speaking. But I've never thought a great deal about His mouth.

Except in the context of the words which came from it.

You know, in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod we are very focused on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the tomb. Which is to say, we are very focused on the actions of Jesus. And that's appropriate and as it should be. It was those actions that accomplished our salvation; without His death and resurrection, there would be no hope for us and no Christian Church. You would not be members and I would be out of a job. It is these actions which set Christianity apart from every other religion. For Christianity is an historic faith, i.e., unlike almost every other religion, it is rooted in concrete actions which took place in the history.

When we consider other religions, we find that they are more ethical systems. Islam, for example, is based on a collection of sayings of a man in a cave. Buddhism and Confucianism, likewise, are philosophies based on the teachings of individuals.

Only Christianity boasts of a God who became one of His creatures and then gave His life to rescue them. And Christianity locates the actions of the Savior in mankind's history, often giving very specific time coordinates, as Luke does when he mentions Caesar Augustus and the other Gospel writers when they record Jesus' trials by Josephus and Pontius Pilate, historic figures verified by other historians.

So, Christianity is a religion of action; our Savior is a man of action, whose actions were necessary to our salvation.

But there is another aspect to the earthly ministry of Jesus that is, if not as important as His actions on the cross and in the tomb, still very important. That is, of course, His words, His teachings.

John calls Jesus the "Logos", the very Word of God. He is the perfect expression of God. And, as Jesus moved among the people of His time, Jews and Gentiles alike, He used words to communicate the wisdom and truth of God.

Jesus was an impressive speaker. He was impressive not necessarily because of His flair or His dramatic style. He was

impressive because He spoke the truth of God with authority. We are told that people noted the difference between Him and the other teachers of His time because He spoke “with authority, not like their teachers.” Unlike the rabbis of His time, Jesus did not make reference to other teachers. They would quote the wisdom and teachings of other, earlier teachers, to buttress their own teachings, much as a lawyer today would cite precedents from other courts to make their case. Jesus had no need to do so. He simply spoke God’s truth directly from His own mouth. He had no need to refer to a higher authority because He is the highest authority.

As Jesus’ taught throughout Israel the Holy Spirit worked in the hearts of His hearers so that they recognized that His mouth spoke only the truth of God. From His mouth they heard things they had never heard before, things which often conflicted with things they had been taught by their religious leaders.

He said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”

And again, from the mouth of Jesus: You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, His hearers heard these words from the mouth of Jesus, which must have had them scratching their heads as they listened in their relative powerlessness:

“Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.”

And then, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” I’m pretty sure none of them considered being insulted, persecuted, and lied about a blessing.

But that was the nature of the message that consistently flowed from the mouth of Jesus: it was revolutionary, it was counter-intuitive, it was counter-cultural. And they were in awe of Him.

Many heard words from the mouth of Jesus they had never heard from the mouth of any other man. Like the woman at the well, who heard her whole sordid life’s story from Jesus mouth, but without the sneering and condemnation she was used to hearing. Rather she heard an appeal to a relationship with God and a better life.

Or the woman caught in adultery who heard from Jesus’ mouth, not words of condemnation but of forgiveness.

Many heard words they had longed to hear all their lives. “Rise, pick up your pallet and go home.”

“Ears, be opened.”

“Little girl, I say to you, arise.”

“Your faith has made you well.”

“Today you will be with me in paradise.”

And some heard words that should have struck fear in their hearts:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees.”

“‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’ ”

And speaking of the one who would betray Him, “It would be better for him if he had never been born.”

But the words which Jesus spoke which those who heard Him were most blessed to hear from His mouth were the words which spoke of the way to eternal life.

Martha, to whom He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”

And His disciples, who heard these words of life: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Jesus used His mouth for the same purpose that He used His whole body: to offer eternal life to all who would believe; to point the only way to eternal life; to invite people into relationship with Him.

I know there are some who, if they had their wish, would go back to the time of Jesus so they could hear those words come directly from His mouth.

I take a different view. I count myself blessed that I did not live in the time of Jesus. I know myself well enough that I fear that if I were in the crowds on the mount or in the temple who heard those words directly, I might be more likely to be among those who rejected Him and ridiculed Him, than like those who received the words of His mouth eagerly and in faith.

I count myself blessed that God called me into faith in Baptism and that I have the words from the mouth of Jesus to read and study.

Jesus, as He did with every aspect of His life on earth, used His mouth perfectly in the service of His Father, to bring truth, light, and salvation into the lives of people.

He calls us to use our mouths to do the same. Sadly, if you are like me, I can recall far too any times when my mouth has uttered words that have no business in the mouth of a follower of Christ, times when I have said ugly things, hateful things in anger, or ridiculed others with my gift of speech. I know that my mouth has spoken words that I almost immediately wish I could take back, but once they are gone, they are gone forever.

I have hurt those I love with impatient words. I have damaged relationships with angry words. I have caused scars with ill-considered words. I have spoken things that reflected poorly on my Savior.

And, conversely, I have failed to speak when I should have. My mouth has remained resolutely closed when I've had the chance to tell others about my Savior, or to speak a word of forgiveness or reconciliation.

The mouth is powerful. James speaks about the power of the tongue, this little organ right behind our lips and compares it to a fire, and to the rudder on a ship. The mouth is a small part of our body, but it is capable of both great evil and great good.

Let us follow the example of our Savior, who never used His mouth for anything but the service of His Father, who never spoke a word that reflected badly on His Father, who employed His mouth to bring words of hope and forgiveness and healing and life into the lives of people.

Let us determine that, this Lent, we will give up coarse and vulgar speech, that we will give up gossip and rumors, that we will not speak in anger or out of hatred or a desire to get even. Let us resolve that we will use our mouths, like Jesus, to heal, to forgive, to build up and encourage, to speak and sing God's praises, to give thanks, to point the way to eternal life, and to introduce others to our Savior.

We know that when we walk through the gates of heaven, it will only be by the grace of God, as free gift, through faith in Jesus who died to purchase our salvation. But when we do, if we have used our mouths in a Godly way during our time on earth, we may be blessed to see the mouth of Jesus lifted in a smile, and to hear that mouth say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."