

“Two-Edged Sword”

Sermon – October 13, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

How much does anyone know the whole “you”? How much do you know you?

There is the area—or more accurately “areas”—of you that are open to others.

There are the hidden areas that don’t share with others.

Then there are the blind areas where others actually know about you that you don’t know about yourself.

There is even the unknown area that neither you or others know about you. And all these areas aren’t the same with all people. People where I work, for example, don’t see the same areas as my grandchildren do and vice versa—both of whom prefer it that way.

Imagine, though, if people saw and knew *everything* about you, including all your thoughts and feelings, from the time you were born until now? All of us have times in our lives or characteristics about ourselves that we are not proud and would be mortified if the world found out.

Well, the good news is that won’t happen. The bad news it’s not world you need to worry about.

Today’s second lesson is the second of five passages we will hear from the book of Hebrews, which is generally called an epistle (that is, a letter) but is really a sermon with a focus on Jewish Christians. Paul is the purported author but really it is unknown.

The lesson starts off with verse 12 from chapter 4,

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Now that’s a comforting thought, isn’t it? Let’s try the next verse:

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“And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.”

Note that the verb rendered “laid bare” in Greek is literally “to grip in a neck-hold”, as a condemned person whose throat is pulled back before the executioner’s blade.

I hope I have painted a vivid enough picture: one of utter vulnerability. We tend to think of the “word of God” as the written scripture or, in the Gospel of John as another name for Jesus. But here in Hebrews it means the actual speaking of God, as in when “God said, let there be light.” Except here, the “word of God” is a two-edged sword, an instrument that penetrates at every point of contact, coming in or going out.

The metaphor might seem a bit odd except the Greek word translated as “two-edged” is literally “two-mouthed”, as in having two edges.

Even in Hebrew “edge” can also mean “mouth”, so “a sword of edges,” (that is, a “two-edged sword”) could also mean “a sword of mouths”—that is, a source of sharp words.

And indeed, God’s words are very sharp and they will leave us bare. All things we hide from ourselves and others will be exposed.

If all of this makes you uncomfortable, even fearful, then, ironically, you should have hope—because you recognize you can never make yourself worthy. That means you are humble before God.

If there is one quality we lack in our society, and with many of our leaders, it is the lack of humility. To be humble is being honest with God about yourself, your weaknesses, and your need for Him. It's about understanding the gifts God has given you, and admitting your failures.

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It is not about thinking less of yourself, but rather thinking of yourself less.

It's about putting others' needs before your own, and sacrificing for the love of others.

Still, being laid open by God is unnerving to say the least. The author of Hebrews, though, after giving us this sobering picture and putting the fear of God into us, turns around and says in verse 16, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

How can we do this? Because verses 14 and 15 tell us we have Jesus as our “great high priest”. For most of us Protestants this is a bit opaque. For the Jewish people the high priest was the mediator between them and God. The author says here in verse 14, “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens” meaning he has come from God and yet, like the temple high priests, was also human with all the ups and downs, the temptations and tests with the exception of being sinless.

And this is our confession, says the author. Further, this high priest in Jesus sympathizes with us having been one of us. For the temple priests ministering to the vulnerable was not usually listed as a primary role on the job description. Their focus tended to be on overseeing the offering of sacrifices and other rituals.

Yet by focusing on that sympathetic aspect of Jesus' character, the author invites the kind of confident trust that he commends to the readers, which he understands to be truly life-giving.

And while “sympathy” is technically the correct translation, in context the fuller meaning is more than feeling sorry for us; it also includes

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empathy—truly being in our shoes. It is more like “compassion”—the combination of sympathy and empathy with a desire to help.

So, it is because we have Jesus as our great, compassionate, Son of God, Son of Man mediator that we can approach the throne of grace with boldness and that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Let’s be clear, though, this is not a good cop/bad cop narrative. That is, God is about to punish you, but nice Jesus steps in and convinces him otherwise. The Father and the Son are different persons, but they are both God and therefore are never at cross-purposes with one another. Since the Father sent the Son to be “the great high priest” both Father and Son speak the word that exposes the heart and both Father and Son sit on the throne that offers grace and help. God in Three Persons knows the hearts of all.

As a two-edged sword, the word of God cuts both ways. It reminds us of our complete and unmitigated accountability to God, who calls us to “live no longer for ourselves but for him who died and was raised on our behalf” (to borrow from 2 Corinthians 5:15), to “pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (from Hebrews 12:14), to “continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name” while also not forgetting “to do good and to share what you have” (Hebrews 13:15-16).

The word gives assurance to us who persevere in grateful obedience and allegiance to Jesus so that by God’s grace “we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

In name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.