

Let go: James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

by [Glenn Mitchell](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

When I was a kid, my brother and I loved playing with toy dinosaurs. I'd let my brother take the ever-popular T. Rex while I went for the stegosaurus. Its back plates and tail spikes were cool, but it was this dinosaur's second brain that put it over the top for me. I think I intuited at an early age that two brains are a good idea in the scheme of things. Frankly, in the years since, I've often suspected that my tongue has a brain of its own. How else to explain what sometimes comes out of my mouth—words that, if given even modest scrutiny by my brain, would be judged to make no sense; words that can be as sharp as the spikes on the stegosaurus's tail; words that make a good case for a second brain dedicated to the nonthinking function of the tongue.

The author of James speaks with great passion about the secret life of the tongue, and the text in the third chapter is filled with metaphors. The tongue is the rudder of a ship; a fire that destroys a great forest; a world of iniquity unto itself; an untamable restless evil full of deadly poison. The author names the tension within the self that the tongue embodies: "With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God." Having named this divided nature, the author raises the lament: "My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?"

If we listen to our Gospel text from Mark with our ears sensitized to James, we can easily imagine the author of the epistle pointing a figure at Peter and saying: "This is what I'm talking about—Peter confesses with his tongue that Jesus is the Messiah and then turns around and rebukes Jesus for speaking of his pending suffering and death." James's word for Peter would be: "Stay steady, quit vacillating." But I sense the Gospel's quick word back to James: "The unity you seek is finally held together by God's presence, not by sheer strength or the perfection of the human will."

Peter brings the gospel to us because he is so much like us. We've a tendency to make too much or too little of life's moments. Peter is always falling off the scale on one side or the other of this. His tongue is quick, and he utters words he can't bring to fruition in his living. In our Gospel text, it is death that Peter wants to take issue

with, and it is death that Jesus offers back to Peter as the inevitable check on all human effort to control life. From the perspective of death such effort seems silly. “Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?” The energy we spend trying to save and secure our lives leads eventually and inevitably to our losing them.

The movement in our text is revealed not only in Jesus’ efforts to get his followers to recognize his pending suffering and death, but also in his efforts to get them to recognize their own deaths. Peter’s response in the text echoes our resistance to this recognition; his rebuke of Jesus includes our own anguish: “Why does this have to be?” All the faith traditions recognize that coming to terms with suffering and death is key to human freedom. The prophet Muhammad said, “Die before you die.” The Sufi mystic Rumi said, “Lose your life, if you seek eternity.” In Mark, Jesus addresses the issue this way: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” In John’s Gospel, in speaking of his passion, Jesus offers the invitation in metaphor: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

All of these texts recognize a paradox: that which is most precious to us can’t be preserved, but only received in gratitude and offered up to God again and again in our living. Within the Christian story, our freedom to be fully present to life, and to make of our living an offering, springs not only from how we hold the passion of Christ but also from how we hold an awareness of our deaths.

The apostle Paul models the integration of the two. He knows both the fragility and the fleeting nature of life and likens our lives to clay jars (2 Cor. 4:7), but he sees too how acceptance of the human condition leads to the full embrace of God’s power of life present with us:

[We are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” (2 Cor. 4:10-12)

The freedom to be fully present to life has everything to do with accepting our suffering and death and letting go of our efforts to control life. Jesus invites us to let go of our grip enough to create a holy space for the gift of God’s presence, right

here and right now.