



## Sermons from

### “SPEAKING FROM THE HEART”

FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
Ann Arbor | Michigan

The Rev. Kristin E. Riegel  
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Matthew 15:10-20

When I was younger, I was always excited because there were always stickers.

There were always stickers and red suckers and cable television, a novelty for me, in the waiting room of the doctor’s office where I went for annual check-ups, sports clearance exams, and strep throat tests in the middle of winter.

The most exciting part of the actual doctor’s appointment was always having my heart checked. *Thump, thump . . . thump, thump . . . thump, thump.*

Yes, there was the ritual practice of the doctor using a stethoscope to listen to my heart, just to make sure everything sounded as it should.

For most of us, any excitement that we may have felt about going to the doctor as a child, usually disappears, or at least lessens, as we age. Perhaps it’s because there are no longer stickers and red suckers at the end of the visit or perhaps it’s because visits to the doctor often come when our bodies are not working in ways that they should or once could.

From public service announcements to apps that track our exercise and caloric intake, our bodies and how we care for them are often put at the center of our attention. However, our bodies are much more than just organs, masses of tissue, and muscles made up of millions of cells.

In today’s scripture, Jesus talks a lot about bodies. Stomachs and human sewage systems. Mouths that speak words from our hearts.

Whereas many of the religious people that Jesus encountered were focused on the body—how it was or was not washed and what foods one should or should not eat—Jesus focuses not on what goes into the body but rather, what comes out of the body with the potential to contaminate—words spoken angrily, lies, half-truths, and insults, as well as actions such as theft, murder, and adultery that have the potential to harm and hurt others.

Although not an MD, Jesus has words to share about what contaminates bodies and harms the health of our relationship with God and one another.

After an exchange with members of the Pharisees, Jesus gathers a crowd of people, saying to them, “Listen and understand. It is not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God’s sight. It is what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ words spoken long ago continue to speak to us, Christ’s disciples and Christ’s body in the world today. This passage raises questions about the health of our hearts. Our hearts, the metaphoric center of ourselves and of us as Christ’s body in the world.

Hearts broken open after words uttered without care in the heat of the moment. Words crouched in a corner that spring out with spikes flying, seeking to tear down, rather than build up.

Hearts overflowing, after news family members have arrived home safely. Hearts bursting with joy at the sight of newborn babies smiling or hugs received from friends who have been away for far too long.

Hearts. Hearts beating. Hearts beating and breaking open, creating a sacred rhythm to life, bursting with love, breaking from hurt, calling us to call on *and call out* to others, to look inside and to see who and what resides deep in the depth of hearts. The beating of our hearts creates a sacred rhythm to our lives. The breaking of our hearts creates space for compassion to be cultivated and words of forgiveness to be spoken.

We wear out our hearts with exercise and age. We wear our hearts on our sleeves in moments when we feel vulnerable or more comfortable than we’ve ever been.

The heart is not only a muscular organ that beats and sustains life in our bodies, it is also the metaphoric center of who we are as people. Just as Jesus calls on the disciples and crowds to examine their hearts, which cultivates their words and actions, Jesus today calls on to look inside and examine the health of hearts, as it is in our hearts that words we speak and actions we take first grow.

Is the soil that is planted in our hearts that which will produce the fruits of patience and kindness that seek not the holiness of one’s self, but the wholeness and well-being of the entire body of God?

If we are honest, I think most of us can admit that we are suffering from heart disease, from diseases of the heart—greed, anger, envy, half-truths, lies, things we’ve said that we wish we wouldn’t have and words we failed to have the courage to speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:10-11 (*Common English Bible*).

When I was younger, I remember learning the nursery rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” As a kid who was often teased, I never liked that nursery rhyme much. A little older, I still do not like it for as we all know, words do hurt. Words spoken hastily and insults leveled against those with whom we disagree or against those whom we love, harsh and hurtful comments posted on Facebook, lies and half-truths said to protect ourselves, which cause pain to others. Words sting and strip away trust from relationships.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Words have the power to hurt people, harm relationships, and to affect the health of the community, to affect the health of the whole body of Christ. Unjust actions and hurtful comments harm relationships and leave scars that can last a lifetime.

The words that we speak, the tones that we use, the ways in which we engage with others grow out of our hearts and go into the world. Words have the power to pull us into deeper community and the power to push people away. The words we speak speak volumes about who and whose we are—showing the world that we seek to love and live in right relationship with God and one another or that we seek to be right, self-righteous, or even, to act in ways which we know are wrong.

What does it mean for us to speak from our hearts? Have we taken the time to confess and seek mercy so that the cobwebs of greed, ambition, half-truths, and hurtful words spoken and actions taken can be cleansed by God’s grace and washed away, so that the words we speak and actions we take will show and shout of God’s mercy, love, and grace?

Words spoken from the heart can build up the community or break it down. When our hearts are clouded or lacking regular exercises of practices of compassion, honesty, and truth, what we speak pollutes the world and hurting other bodies, hurting Christ’s body. When we speak with compassion, love, honesty, and kindness, our words have the ability to heal, nourish, replenish, and repair relationships.

As Christians today, we live as Christ’s body in the world. We live as one body, made up of many bodies. Our relationship with God is a personal, but never private one. How we speak speaks volumes about who and whose we are.

As followers of Christ, we are to be known by the love, mercy, and grace that flows from Christ and radiates into the world. Each week during worship, we confess our sins and seek forgiveness and mercy from God. Each week, we pray that God strengthen and empower us to love and live lives that honor God. Each week, we ask that God cleanse our hearts, renew our minds, and empower us to live and serve as Christ’s disciples, Christ’s body in the world.

Our hearts are important for without them, we would not be able to physically live. Our hearts are important, for as Jesus reminds us, it is our hearts that harbor love and fear, good and bad, the words we speak, and the intentions behind what we do.

The heart of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection was about relationships—how we live in righteous relationship with God and one another. How we love, show mercy, speak with kindness, and seek justice for all of God's children.

Jesus calls for us to reflect on how careless words uttered without love, hurt our body, everybody, Christ's body in the world.

As people who have received Christ's love and had our hearts changed by God, let our hearts grow the seeds of compassion, patience, and hope. Let our words come from our hearts, hearts that are full of love, mercy, honesty, and compassion.

When people listen to the rhythm of our speech, let them hear in it, Christ's love beating in our hearts. *Thump, thump . . . thump, thump . . . thump, thump.*

In the name of God, our Creator, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, and the Spirit that sustains us, Amen.

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**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
1432 Washtenaw Avenue  
Ann Arbor, Michigan