

Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

When my children were teenagers, I put a little sign on the front of the refrigerator door. That was the one place in the house that I knew they would visit multiple times during the day. The sign was a message that I wanted them to digest and contemplate. It said: "I know you think you understand what you thought I said, but what you may not realize is, what you heard is not what I meant." Such is the nature of communication with words. It's easy to lose the meaning. It's easy to hear something other than what was intended. In short, it's easy to misunderstand.

The outcome of verbal communication is what the letter of James addresses today in our epistle lesson. It's attributed to James, the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. It's ironic, since he is in a position of high authority in the early church, that he starts out by warning the reader...or listener...that those who occupy places of authority need to be more careful with their words than people who do not. Having authority means that their verbal pronouncements carry more weight and are more apt to be believed...so they had better be accurate. And they need to be prepared to take responsibility for what they say. Therefore, those in authority need to be more careful in their speech than the average person. In this week's epistle lesson, James stakes out a position quite at odds with contemporary enthusiasm for spontaneous outbursts of unfiltered passion. Have any of you been on the receiving end of any of those lately? It's usually most unpleasant.

Instead of the spontaneous and unfiltered outbursts, James challenges Christians, especially leaders, to express themselves carefully, as befits sisters and brothers made in the image of God. As Americans, we tend to value the Bill of Rights and all the rights and privileges it gives us. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights is the Freedom of Speech. However, it does not mean that we can say whatever we want wherever we want about anybody we want without consequence. We can't, for example, scream 'fire' in a crowded theater. We would start a stampede that could easily harm many people. And being 'politically correct' is just another way of describing having some sensitivity about other people's feelings or priorities or their points of view when we speak. It's courteous. And we have libel laws that prevent us from speaking lies about another person or their actions. Free speech isn't completely free. There are consequences. And we are beginning to understand the damage done by dis-information campaigns that disseminate inaccurate information that lead people to beliefs that can be harmful to them as well as others. That's exactly James' point. People in positions of

authority...people who have a platform to speak to the public...have a responsibility to be both accurate and truthful in what they say.

Stop and think for a minute...not just about the power of words, but of the miracle of language in the first place! When we hear the story of creation, we hear that God spoke all things into being: light and darkness; water for the heavens and for the earth; dry land; vegetation that provided food; the sun, the moon and the stars; living creatures that occupied the waters and those that lived on the land and those that flew in the air; and the crowning masterpiece that was humankind made in the image of God. And God gave to humankind the gift of language and the honor of naming everything that God had created. No other creature was given the gift of language. Think about that!! That's powerful!

Think about the part that language played in the building of the Tower of Babel for example. All was well and all were working together to build a stairway to heaven. Language had enabled the humans to plan and to coordinate and to work together and when God scrambled the language they were no longer able to finish their project. Intelligible language is key to the development of humankind and to the building of human relationships, although non-verbal communication can be quite effective as well. However, language not only helps to build relationships between human beings; language can also be the source of great hurt and animosity and division. Spoken language is a door that swings both ways...healing or hurtful.

The importance of the spoken word is emphasized at the beginning of the Gospel according to John. You will recall the opening verses of that Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."¹ Indeed, we refer to Jesus himself as the Word that became flesh and lived among us and from his fullness we all have received grace upon grace.

Words are important. Words have power. Words can create and words can destroy. They can build up and they can tear down. They can heal and they can wound. A few carelessly uttered words can feel like a physical blow or can break a heart into tiny pieces. And a few well-chosen thoughtful words can mend a wound or soothe a grieving heart. And such words have more power still if they are spoken by someone with authority....especially church leaders. To be called to preach is to play with fire...Holy Spirit fire that lights us up and energizes us and moves us toward the implementation of our mission...or it can be the sort of unholy fire that James describes in this letter...one that leads us into idolatry and coaxes us to build friendships with the world and the culture that calls us away from what we say we believe. True Christianity

always has been and still is in conflict with the larger world and the dominate culture...although so much of the time, we try desperately to fit into the larger culture.

And then James turns his attention to the tongue...that tiny muscle inside our mouths that makes speech possible...and James considers it a restless evil full of deadly poison. Consider, for example, the fact that with this same muscle we both bless one another and curse one another. The tongue is duplicitous. With this same little muscle and out of the same mouth we can wound and we can heal; we can drive away another or pull them close; we can build a relationship and even more quickly destroy it. James says it makes no sense at all that the tongue can render the opposite effects depending on how we choose to use it. But that's the truth. The tongue can be used to bless another and can also be used to curse another. He points out that one plant does not yield both figs and olives; it's either one or the other. And he tells us that brackish water and pure water do not come from the same source. This duality of the tongue is found only in human beings. And how we use it determines how we impact others...for good or for ill.

And James points out that the power of the tongue is not related to its size. Consider how small the bit of a bridle is in a horse's mouth and, yet, a skilled rider can control the horse's entire body by the way the bridle is used. It's rather ironic that the way the bridle controls the horse is by applying pressure to its tongue. And James uses another metaphor to describe the irony of the size versus the impact of the control the tongue has. He reminds us that the rudder on a boat is very small compared to the size of the boat and, yet, in the hands of skilled sailors, the movement of that tiny rudder can guide the far larger vessel to safety or it can run it aground. James also likens the tiny tongue to a fire. A small spark can start a blazing forest fire that will destroy everything in its path and is almost impossible to contain or put out. Ask the people in California!! That's the effect that a tongue fueled by gossip and supposition and speculation can have on another person's life and it doesn't take long. It can destroy it and a destroyed life is hard, if not impossible, to rebuild. On the other hand, a tongue set on fire by the Holy Spirit can move mountains of resistance, ignite passion in a sleeping heart, energize a sluggish giant, and empower a creative mind to take action.

James is calling the new and restless and sometimes frightened church to pay attention to how it behaves...both within its own walls and among the larger culture. And he calling us to do the same...to pay attention to how we behave. Taming the tongue is part of how those in the church need to behave...then as well as now. The criticism so often heard about the organized church is that it's full of hypocrites. The best answer I ever heard to that critique is, "Yes. And there's always room for one more." You see the church is not a haven for saints; it's a hospital for sinners. It's where we go to be instructed, to be spiritually fed, to be reminded that we are

loved, to practice forgiveness...lots of opportunities in a church to practice forgiveness...and sometimes to remind ourselves how to be still and listen to the silence into which God speaks. James invites us to consider the importance of silence not only as a means to listen for God but also as a spiritual practice of bridling our tongues. Listen...don't speak!! In so many respects, we have forgotten how to listen and we get anxious if no one is filling up the air with talk. We are often so busy building our response to what someone else is saying that we stop listening to them at all, but merely wait for them to stop talking so we can give the answer we devised while they were still speaking. Silence is crucial to taming and controlling the tongue. Before you speak, pause for a moment and remember that how you say something may be just as important as what you say. And consider whether or not what you are about to say needs to be said at all. And keep in mind that the same tongue that praises and heals can also be the same tongue that mortally wounds. Choose words carefully. And from time to time, don't choose any words at all.

Just listen.

The life-giving God who created us and the Word who walked among us will help us on this quest to tame the tongue each step of the way.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹The New Oxford Annotated Bible, third edition, New Testament, p. 147 & 148.