

Proper 19 B
September 16th, 2018
Mark 8:27-38
St. George's Episcopal Church
Fr. Chris

Tongue Tied

“Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.”

I don't know about you, but I am far from perfect. I wish, and I try not to be at fault in what I say, but that is just not possible. I make lots of errors: sometimes I boast; sometimes I use hyperbole or exaggerate, and I find it easy to lie when I should struggle to tell the truth, even when a lie appears to be for a good reason.

When I first started out as a young clergy person, I did not have to worry about 'fact-checking.' I did my best to teach confirmation classes and adult classes accurately, but I know in hindsight that I sometimes failed. Today, this is no longer possible. When I started out, you read the truth and the facts in books, took notes and expressed or interpreted them to others. Today anyone can look things up on the Internet and fact check in a matter of seconds. You cannot get away with fudging the facts or the truth. Others will quickly know if you do. That puts a new burden of responsibility on those who teach to be circumspect about what words come forth from their mouths. That is a good thing. The truth always wins out.

That is true with preaching. Sermons must be rooted in the truth. You should not presume to talk about something that is not part of your real experience unless you are honest with people and tell them so. Our faith and religion are not “soft truths” or matters of personal opinion. Wisdom is greater than opinion. It is based on experience, listening, learning, and insight. It is easy to tell when something is not wise or true, because something about it does not ring true. Red flags go up in our minds. It is better to speak a few words of truth than many words of hyperbole, exaggeration or just plain untruth.

When we were little, we were taught the saying, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” I question the usefulness of this phrase/cliché as adults: names do hurt, and can hurt us more than a bruise or a broken body member. Call me a gossip, a liar, a thief, a slanderer, or whatever name you wish, and these names stick for sometimes decades defining who you are

to yourself, and who others expect you to be. Your name does matter. Try to get a job after it has been besmirched, rightly or wrongly. You will likely have to move away and restart your life somewhere else, if you want to escape a bad name or the gossip of others. And the gossip doesn't just go away, it gets worse and more hurtful with time, trust me.

They roll so easily off the tongue. Names can hurt us and destroy our reputations. Name-calling very often happens in the home with the people you are supposed to love, and those closest to you. We see how far we can push someone with these weapons. We feel that because they are family, they will not turn and leave us. Again, trust me, when enough of these word bombs are fired at someone, they will leave for their own sanity. But what does that say about the sanity of the person who fired them?

I don't like name-calling. I have been called them enough. Sometimes the names may be badges of honor when you have stood up for the truth. However, in our discourse it is all too easy these days to toss them out there and see if they will stick to someone and bring them down. Name-calling never works for me. Name-calling does not work for God. Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:22: "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." The Jews used the word "Raca" as a word of contempt. The root of the word means, "to spit." Words are to be taken seriously. What comes forth from our mouths matters, especially if it hurts someone else.

Consider the strong words of James, when he says in today's Epistle: "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider that a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell" When we do not choose our words carefully, we risk being guilty of arson, and perhaps bringing the condemnation of hellfire upon ourselves. Name-calling and gossip do spread like a wildfire, and we know the damage they can cause others. We should be very careful before we speak, and we should not pass the spark of gossip to others. Put out those fires, and fight them, as Smokey the Bear would say. Don't walk away and leave a fire burning. Take your chance and opportunity and put it out. It is easier to call gossip for what it is, than to spread it to others, for when you do spread it, you become a gossip yourself. It is easier to say you are sorry than to go on being angry and name-calling. It is easier to tell the truth, than to go on telling a lie and weaving the tangled web you must do to keep the lie alive. There is so

much more effort that must be put into lying, and the lies are like deadly cancer cells, eating you up inside until they destroy your heart, your mind and finally, your soul.

James says, “No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” The answer is obviously, yes. We can be full of contradictions in our actions, particularly with how we use our tongues, between what we say we believe and how we actually put that into practice.

It is true that no human being can completely tame their tongue, but we can discipline ourselves to be watchful of saying hurtful or untruthful things, or to avoid spreading rumors and gossip.

The more that we can become listeners instead of speakers, we will gain spiritual wisdom, and reduce the risk of becoming tongue tied by cursing and other poison coming from our mouths. As James said himself: “Be quick to listen and slow to speak.” [James 1:19] Religious for years have taken vows of silence or observed periods of silence to listen for God during their days. It would do us well if we took some time to do the same. Listening breeds wisdom, and the world needs wisdom spoken in it.

The morning prayer to utter every day goes something like this,
‘Open my lips, O Lord, and let my mouth proclaim your praise:
Good News and not Bad News, Truth and not Lies, True Witness and not False
Witness; Blessings and not Curses,’ AMEN