

Taming the Tongue
James 3:1-12; Mark 7:31-37
September 17, 2006

A pastor was making a wooden trellis to support a climbing vine. As he was pounding away, he noticed that a little boy was watching him. The youngster didn't say a word, so the preaching kept on working, thinking the lad would leave. But he didn't.

Pleased at the thought that his work was being admired, the pastor finally said, "Well, son, trying to pick up some pointers on gardening?"

"No," the boy replied. "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer."¹

These days no one is free from censorship. The words of clergy, politicians, civic leaders, and even actors are scrutinized for morality, cultural sensitivity, and political correctness. Words are powerful tools. They can do great good and they can create immense destruction.

Today's scripture lesson from James has a strong warning about the content of our speech. He doesn't beat around the bush. He tells us that this is a problem for each of us. All of us make many mistakes with what comes out of our mouths. James also doesn't give us much hope: you can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. Just because our speech will never be perfect doesn't excuse us from trying. This morning we ponder how to tame our tongues.

A thread running through the book of James is perfection. Some scholars find that the call to perfection is the thrust of the entire letter. When James is urging believers to perfection, it is not an unattainable moral ideal that he commands. The connotation of the Greek word *teleios* is "wholeness, completion." It means being wholly true to what one has been created to be in the image of the Creator. The word expresses maturity, wholeness, and completeness.

In James' mind, the ideal is that the speech of Christians reflects their striving to become wholly what they are created to be. He uses vivid metaphors to describe the power of speech. The tongue is likened to the bridle used on a horse or a rudder on a ship. The bridle is tiny in comparison to the horse it controls, just as a minuscule rudder guides a mammoth vessel. So too, the tongue is a tiny organ guiding speech that can have enormous effects. The metaphor shifts to that of a tiny fire that can set ablaze a whole forest. An uncontrolled tongue, just like a fire, can have deadly consequences.

Another frequent theme of James is integrity. In the first two chapters we heard the call for congruity between our faith and deeds. Now we are called to be consistent in our speech. Christians cannot bless God while cursing fellow human beings. That would be like a spring gushing both fresh and salt water; it just can't be. Nor should it be. If we love God, we will treat God's creation with respect. If our allegiance is to God, then we will behave as God would have us behave, not as the world tempts us to act. We mustn't be double-minded in our language. The products of our speech reveal their source. If we claim the name of Christ, our language must be consistent with the Word of God revealed by Jesus. It has been said that a mature Christian is someone who would not hesitate to sell her talking parrot to the town gossip! A first key to tongue taming is being connected to the Source of Life, the spring of Living Water, from which healthy, healing, holy words flow.

In order for our speech to have integrity, to truly flow from our faith, we need to be open to self-examination. A daily ritual might be to ask ourselves, "What have I said today that was a blessing? What have I said today that was not aligned with God's purposes?" What healing words have I spoken? What hurtful words have I spoken? It takes discipline to withhold that which is harmful and unnecessary and to speak only that which is helpful and mature.

It is important to think before we speak. Words cannot be retracted once they have been given voice. Language has an immediate impact as well as long-lasting consequences. I can more vividly remember the few painful things said to me than I can clearly recall the numerous positive comments. A second key is knowing when to hold the tongue rather than inflict harm.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian martyr of the Second World War, believed that there was a special ministry to be performed in holding one's tongue. "Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively," he wrote, "if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words." Bonhoeffer discovered that if we hold our tongues and control our gossip about other people, then we discover that everyone has a place in the community – strong and weak, wise and foolish, gifted and ungifted. Slowly we begin to see that these differences are not incentives for talking, judging, and condemning each other, but are instead causes for rejoicing in one another and serving one another. In the end, we realize that each member of the community is made in the image of God and each person has a particular form of service to offer.

This great spiritual awakening begins with a simple step: keeping our mouths shut. The challenge is

- ◆ to bless people through truth-telling, not curse them through storytelling;
- ◆ to speak directly *to* them, not speak to others *about* them.²

A man lived in a highland village in Scotland. He passed along a story about another man whom he didn't like. At the time, he thought the story to be true. When the story got around the village, it utterly destroyed the man. His family, his job, and his integrity were all devastated by the rumor mill. He finally had to leave town – a ruined and defeated man.

In time, the fellow who passed the story along discovered that the rumor was false. He had helped to destroy an innocent man with his tongue. He went to his pastor and confessed the story. “I have destroyed a man with my words. Please, I am sorry. Can I be forgiven this sin?”

The pastor told the man that this was not so simple. He instructed him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the fellow thought this to be a strange request, he really wanted forgiveness, and so he followed the instructions to the letter. At last he came back to the pastor and said, “I have done all that you asked, may I now be forgiven?”

“Not yet, my son,” the pastor replied. “You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village.”

“But—I could never do that; the wind has carried the feathers away!”

“Yes,” the pastor replied, “and in like manner have your careless words destroyed an innocent man.”³

There is a time to speak and a time to be silent. Sometimes it is best that words never pass through our lips.

When the time is right to speak, a third key to tongue taming is choosing words that build up, rather than words that tear down. The gift of language is one of the characteristics that makes human beings stand out from all other creatures. We are given the power to name and thereby to continue God's creative activity in the world. Language is a tool given for the purpose of giving life, naming, blessing, and affirming. Speech has the capacity to create a world – a world of joy, faith, hope, and peace. But too frequently language is used to curse and to destroy. Our language can “create distorted worlds of meaning within which the word of truth is suppressed.”⁴

An old Arab proverb suggests that the words of the tongue should pass through three gateways: 1) Is it true? 2) Is it kind? 3) Is it necessary? Those are great questions to ask as we strive for maturity and perfection in

our speaking. Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? This kind of self-control and discipline is key to taming the tongue, to bridling it for blessing and steering it toward wholeness.

James implies that an undisciplined tongue leads to an overall undisciplined pattern of life. "It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is by itself set on fire by hell." He argues that the person of "loose lips" will develop other out-of-control habits such as addictions, aggression, or anger. I recognize that when my mind, emotions, spirit, or body is not functioning well, the other systems are also thrown out of balance. Maintaining our own sense of well-being helps us keep our tongue in check. When we are mentally alert, we are likely to think before we speak. When we are in touch with our own emotions, we are less likely to project our own issues onto others. When our bodies are rested, fit, and properly nourished, our tongues are more easily tamed. When our spiritual lives are healthy, we will desire to bless rather than curse.

I once read a list of the most important words to use. The six most important words are "I admit I made a mistake." The five most important words are "You did a good job." The four most important words are "What is your opinion?" Three are "If you please." The two most important words to know and use are "Thank you." But the single most important word is "God."

This brings us back to where we began. Knowing God and putting God first is ultimate in tongue taming, so that our speech is congruent with the demands of our faith. Discerning when to hold the tongue is as crucial as choosing the right words to say, words that are true, kind, and necessary.

A master chef invited some of his friends for dinner. He told them to request whatever they wanted. One of the women requested that he make the most delicious dish he could ever make. That night the chef served tongue. The following week he invited his friends over again telling them once again to make a request. A man suggested that the chef serve the absolute worst dish he could ever serve. The chef served tongue. His friends thought it was odd and asked how it could be that tongue is both the best and the worst dish you can ever serve. The chef replied that it is the power of the tongue. It can be used to build up with words of kindness and beauty, or it can be used to tear down with maliciousness and cruelty.

Since my son Jeff's birth, nearly every time I have left him at home or school or somewhere else, I have left him with a parting phrase: "You are a blessing." My hope and my prayer is that no matter what else might be said to him in my absence and no matter whatever else my untamed tongue may slip and say at other times, the words that he will hear most frequently and

be implanted within him are those: “You are a blessing.” With those words he will remember that he is a precious child of God. With those words he will remember that he is called to be a blessing to others.

The power is in our tongues, my friends. Let us employ them not to curse and destroy life, but rather to bless and give life abundant.

¹ *Homiletics*, September 2006, p. 30.

² *Homiletics*, September 2003, p. 23.

³ *Homiletics*, September 2006, p. 29.

⁴ Luke T. Johnson, "The Letter of James Commentary," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 205.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA