

Today we talk about how we use our words, our tongues. What we say can get us into deep trouble. We know this, for it's likely we've said something that we wish we had not. Perhaps we were just really mad and let somebody else have a piece of our mind. Or perhaps we were too honest and unintentionally hurt someone we love with our words. Or perhaps we were deceitful and our words carried less than truth, and damage was done. Words can hurt and alienate as easily as they can provide deep joy and assurance to another.

How we use our tongues matters! The letter of James shows that James was struggling to get the early Christians to exist together peacefully. Like any group of people (and especially Christians!) today, they were apparently having trouble with the way they were using their tongues. During worship they were praising God and sounding humble and religious. But after worship, in the "parking lot" or whatever they had in that day, they were gossiping about each other and even using their voices to curse folks. So James challenged them to see how they were falling short when it came to being faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

If you use your tongue to curse, it cannot authentically praise... A spring does not produce both salty and fresh water... So James warned the Christians that the way they chose to use their tongues reflected their entire relationship with God. Were their words primarily words of healing and reconciliation, or were they using their tongue and even their religion as a divisive weapon, a way to attack one another.

As the political competitions heat up you've probably noticed how the various candidates hoping to be nominated to run for President have used their tongues. Some say the same old stuff we hear every four years, perhaps producing yawns from their hearers. Some come out criticizing just about everybody. One in particular can slice and dice the other candidates and our present leaders with his very sharp tongue. All the candidates strive to present words, ideas and personality in such a way as to win votes. The use of the tongue for the politician is extremely important!!

What does the tongue have to do with our lives as Christians? A lot! As James stated, the tongue is rather like a rudder on a boat, and it has terrible power.... James is big on folks not just talking religious talk but actually LIVING as those who take Jesus seriously. Our use of our tongues is a large part of the way we proclaim whether or not we follow Jesus.

We may ask, "What does my tongue have to do with my soul?" *Jesus* made the connection very plain when he said: "I tell you, on the day of judgment you must render account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36-37). The words we speak are extremely important to God, even if they seem unimportant to us.

Years ago a professor in an American theological school spent a year in what was then the Soviet Union. Later, back in the United States, he realized that there seemed little difference between the way his atheist friends in Russia and his Christian friends in the United States went about their lives. He spoke to an associate about it: "There's really no difference in conversation, morality, and outlook between an atheist and an average American. The atheist makes decisions, decides on

what he/she will do tomorrow, the same way I do. When it comes down to it, most of us live as atheists; it's as natural as the air we breathe in modern life - We all live as if God doesn't matter!" ... The big question for us is: Who do our lives say that Jesus is? Does the way we live our lives declare to others that God matters?

In the gospel lesson, Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter used his tongue to proclaim that he believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. When he did so, Peter was thinking that "Messiah" meant that Jesus would overthrow the Roman occupation and free Israel from the oppression they were under. But Jesus started telling him that it meant something else, that Jesus would have to suffer and die... Peter couldn't stand hearing such, and began to rebuke Jesus. Jesus then chastised Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" and then he taught Peter about a very different way from what he had been thinking: "Whoever would save his life must lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it..."

Think about Peter's use of his own tongue as Jesus went to the cross, though. Peter was quick to confess his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, but he was also quick to deny even knowing Jesus later, when Jesus had been arrested by the authorities, even though right beforehand Peter had promised to be true to Jesus even to the death.... His tongue said one thing, but he ended up doing something else. In this, I identify with Peter. I hear (and preach!) that I am to follow the way of Jesus, to meet adversity with peace and animosity with love, to be generous, to forgive, but I find it very hard to do so.

This morning, I woke up with the same headache I went to bed with last night. All sorts of concerns and anxieties filled my pillow and robbed me of rest. As I tried to pray, a couple of things came to mind:

One, that COPD commercial on television where the grandfather is reading the story of the three pigs and the big bad wolf to his grandchildren, and he tells that he cannot get enough air OUT of his lungs to let fresh air - oxygen - in. I realized that my faith-airways are clogged with all the STUFF I'm worrying about, like the parking lot situation and Daniel's needs and all sorts of other things. You probably know how this is: We cannot let go of the stuff clogging our spiritual airways - our fears, angers, self-centeredness, grudges, disappointments, anxieties - to let God's Holy Spirit refresh us and renew and guide us. We have trouble letting God guide our tongues, our minds, and our hearts. We cannot clear our spiritual airways ourselves! We need to ask God to help us. God will.

The other image I was given as a multitude of issues pounded in my head was this: Growing up in the South, I saw folks making fried chicken even though my own parents did not cook it. The image I have is a woman putting the pieces of chicken in a brown paper shopping bag into which she had poured some flour and seasonings. She put the chicken in and closed up the bag and shook it, so that the flour would coat the pieces. In my imagining, that's sort of what happens when we hand our worries over to God: the

Master Chef coats them with God's Holy Spirit and "cooks" them and finally brings forth something wonderful and life-sustaining for us right out of the very things that were sucking the life and peace and joy out of us.

Many of us struggle to trust God, to believe that God really loves us and that we can risk following Jesus. Here's a story I have shared in this church before: A man shared his insight about how hard it is to trust God: "I remember in the last days of my mother's life, I used to carry her up and down the stairs of our home. She was badly arthritic and couldn't negotiate the stairs by herself. As I would carry her up and down the stairs, she would grab the bannister and hold on so that we couldn't move. I would say, 'Mom, let go. We can't move.' And she would always say the same thing: 'I'm afraid you will drop me.' My next line in dialogue was, 'No, I won't drop you. Let go.' And she would always respond, 'No, I am afraid you will drop me.' Then she would let go for a little while and we would start to move, and then she would grab the bannister again.

One day as we were going through our little routine, I thought to myself, "What an analogy for faith! God has us in his arms and is saying, "Come on, let go," and we are saying to him, "No, I am afraid you will drop me. What if it isn't true? What if I dreamed it all up? What if all this about Jesus was all wrong?" And God is saying, "Let go. I am with you. Let go of your frantic clutch on life. If you really let go, you will be fine. If you really let go, you will learn how much I love you." (Old story -original source uncertain)

We are the church, members of the Body of Christ. Every day, every hour, we decide whether to live as though God is really here or not, whether to trust the story of Jesus, with all its challenges and difficulties, as the best way for us to proceed in life, or not. Our tongues and our lives speak loudly as to how we have really answered the big question: Is Jesus really the Messiah, and am I willing to follow where HE leads me?.

Our use of our tongues, the words we choose, the commitments we make, the curses we utter, the encouragements we share, the verbal barbs we throw, the silences we hold, are all a part of our faith articulation, our decision to either follow Jesus or not. Our choices matter to God.

By the grace and power of God and the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, may our tongues be rudders which so direct our hearts towards life that we are able and willing to offer true praise to God by sharing hope, food, forgiveness, and peace with this world; in Christ's name! Amen.