

Sermon "The Challenge of the Tongue" Mark 8:27-36 James 3:1-12 Sept. 16, 2012

We've heard a lot of promises lately, and lots of words from politicians on all sides and levels of campaigns. Words, many of them contained in very expensive ads, are hurled with the intention of damaging the opponent. Growing up, I heard over and over again, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Over and over again, growing up, I learned how false that little saying is, and how deeply a person can be hurt by the words of another.

Words can lift or belittle, encourage or crush. Our words can break down marriages, make conversation with our children heartbreaking, and even cause us to lose our jobs.... On a larger scale, they can get us into war and into debt... Close to home, if a child is told he or she is "stupid" or a bother, that child will grow up with a heavy burden; but if a child is told how blessed the parents feel to have the child and how wonderful the gifts are that God has given the child, that child will move forward in life with a heart to serve God. Our words have the power to alienate or welcome, and the words we hear in a day can make or break it. All of this is to say that words are powerful, and our use of words is terribly important to our walk as Christians.

The writer of the epistle we heard today, James, compared the tongue to the bit in a horse's mouth, with the entire direction of the horse being determined by the control exerted on a small piece of metal in its mouth... Or the rudder on a boat. The tiny rudder is what makes it possible for a huge ship to be turned and guided. "So it is that the tongue is only a tiny part of the body, but it can proudly claim that it does great things..." But James warned that the tongue can be used for good things or for terrible things: nobody can tame the tongue (3:8). "We use it to bless the Lord and Father, but we also use it to curse men who are made in God's image: the blessing and the curse come out of the same mouth. My brothers, this must be wrong — does any water supply give a flow of fresh water and salt water out of the same pipe?" (3:10)

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 say are extremely important to God, even if they seem unimportant to us.

James warned: "The tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature and set on fire by hell. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" How true. Words can be a fire and when people hear hateful, inflammatory words, they become the dry kindling which spreads the fire beyond anyone's control. Rumors are dangerous!

Centuries ago in Salem, Massachusetts, the words, "She's a witch!", spoken by a superstitious minister (Samuel Sewell), unleashed a fire of madness which consumed a whole town. Decades ago in Washington, D.C., the words, "He's a communist!" spoken by a Senator from Wisconsin (Joseph McCarthy), unleashed another form of madness which consumed a whole nation.

Words can be a weapon and tend to have a life of their own once they are spoken. But words do one more thing: they reveal something deep and intimate about the people who speak them. When someone speaks words of bigotry or prejudice, she reveals herself as an ignorant, hate-filled person. When someone says he will do something but consistently fails to show up to do it, he reveals himself as someone who is unreliable. When people take the Lord's name in vain or swear against God, they reveal themselves as people who are careless when it comes to God. We expose our inner nature by the way we use our tongues.

As we have seen in our reading of James for the past two Sundays and today, James is big on folks not just talking religious talk but actually LIVING as those who take Jesus seriously. And James would have us know that a vitally serious part of following Jesus is watching out for how we use our tongues!

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.

Christians today need to be totally aware of what we are doing with our words. If we say we love Jesus, and then we let our tongues spew curses or words of hatred at others, ARE we loving him? If the rudder turns, so does the ship.

A ruthless businessman once said to author Mark Twain, “Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud from the top.” Mark Twain replied, “I have a better idea. Stay home and *keep* them.”

(From “The Stories at His Place,” www.cyberspacecommunitychurch.com) paraphrased)

(Pause)

All of us struggle to trust God, to believe that God really loves us and that we can risk following Jesus. 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 clearly of our choices.

Our use of our tongues, the words we choose, the commitments we make, the curses we utter, the encouragements we share, and 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, may our tongues be rudders which so direct our hearts towards life that we offer true praise to God and share hope and love with this world. Amen.