

We continue in matter of fact, say it like it is, book of James this morning. As a reminder, for James, the marks of true religion and living out what it means to love your neighbor are integrity of speech (words) and concern for the weak and vulnerable (actions). Today we look at integrity of speech. In chapter 1, vs. 19 James writes, “Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry” (1:19 CEB). This leads to today’s passage in chapter 3 where James addresses controlling or taming the tongue. This is “the longest passage in the Bible about the role of speech in the life of a Christian”(journeyswithjesus.net). For James speech is one of the biggest ways in which we sin. James agrees with Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel that a person’s words are the revelation of their character (12:34-37). Before turning to God’s word for us this day, first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. James 3:1-12**

Several male ministers from a small town were out in a boat- fishing. Due to little activity among the fish, they began talking. Since they had counseled their parishioners for many years that **confession is good for the soul**, they decided they would **practice what they had been preaching**. Each decided to confess his secret sin to the others. The **first said that his great fault was his language**; he still had trouble once in a while holding back improper words. The **second minister admitted that his weakness was materialism**; he was too fond of money and it was his first and main consideration in changing pastorates. The **third preacher broke the news of an addiction to petty gambling on anything from golf to football**. The **last minister**, who was the *helmsman on the small craft*, had, by this time, turned the boat toward the shore and had increased the speed. One of the

confessors said, “What’s the hurry? Besides you haven’t made your confession yet.” The minister replied, **“Well, you see, my sin is gossip; and I just can’t wait to get home.”**

Yes, we laugh because we painfully know our sinfulness to be true. Whose tongue has gotten them into trouble before? How many of us have been tempted or actually have bad mouthed a sister or brother in Christ? Or used prayer as a guise to gossip? Or said something mean or started rumors just because? What about sharing false information? How much wiser and more Christlike might we be if we were to listen more and to talk less? It’s bad enough to say the wrong thing but to be in the speaking profession and to say the wrong thing...well, that’s just really embarrassing. Believe me, I know from experience. We all make mistakes with our words, as I would venture to say most, if not all of us, have yet to reach full maturity in our faith. James begins this chapter by saying not many of those gathered should become “teachers.” Why and who are the teachers? James says that there will be more judgement for the teachers. James identifies as a teacher and “within the overall context of the letter, he also considers teachers as ‘servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1)” (*The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, Timothy B. Cargal, p. 663). When we think of a teacher, we often think of someone who has influence over those they teach. And when we think of teachers with integrity, we think of those who practice what they teach. However, it’s not just those of you who make your living teaching or who have signed up to teach Bible Study who are teachers. No, for James a “teacher” would’ve included most if not all of his readers- which also includes any of us who follow Christ. James might argue by our words and actions, we’re teachers of the Christian faith. Afterall, ministry is done

by the whole of the church. *We are every bit as much stewards of speech as we are of our time and talents and treasures* (Allen McSween).

James uses real life images as metaphors to help him make his point about the tongue. He compares it to a horse's bridle, or a ship's rudder, or a small fire in its ability to generate great impact on the lives of others. Though small in size, both the bit and the rudder control the direction of the much bigger body to which they are attached. The tongue controls the direction of a person. "What does it mean to think of your tongue as the driver that controls your whole being? Or perhaps, in today's vernacular, what does it mean to think of our entire being as controlled by what we put on social media" (workingpreacher.org, Margaret Aymer)? Our thoughts become our words. Listen to this quote attributed to Ghandi. "Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become your character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny."

Last week a colleague of mine in a small town in the upstate shared this story with me with her congregation and gave me permission to share it with you. A couple of weeks ago, there was an unfortunate incident. She didn't witness it, but she learned about it on Facebook. More than what actually happened, she was more disturbed by the comments of members of this particular local facebook group. There was a woman walking down Hwy. 123 naked. Rather than offering her help, so many people took pictures of her and posted them along with hateful words. The comments about this woman made my colleague literally weep. So many people were

casting judgment upon this woman without asking how they as a community might actually help her. She ended up at a local gas station down from several churches in town, and some good Samaritan did help her. That good Samaritan? My colleague says that he's known in town as being the town drunk. But my colleague couldn't help but wonder how many people who drove by, snapped a picture and wrote those hateful things about this obviously distraught woman, would be sitting in a church somewhere the next Sunday.

"Our words can protect, affirm, and celebrate the dignity and worth of every human being or reduce people to labels" (journeyswithjesus.net). "Child of God." "Naked woman. Town drunk." If you look closely towards the end of today's scripture lesson, you will see a reference to the creation story in verse 9- "made in the likeness of God." James references how faithful Christians should speak with integrity about other human beings made in God's own image (3:9). "God's speech in creation was good, both in its content and its effect (Gen. 1:3-4). So should ours be" (*Connections*, Laura Sweat Holmes). However, James observes that with the same mouth folks are blessing God AND cursing their neighbor. In other words, "to curse a human being is, in effect, is to curse God (Gen. 9:6)" (CEB Study Bible, p. 458). That's messed up! Just like both fresh and salt water don't come from the same spring nor can a fig tree produce olives nor a grapevine produce figs (James 3:11-12). We shouldn't behave this way, says James. As followers of Christ, we're called to speak or write or type in ways that reflect the character or will of God. James invites us to consider

speaking to one another “as informed by the ways we speak to God” (Aymer). Not only theology but science even tells us that words matter.

Japanese scientist, **Dr. Masaru Emoto** conducted “The Water Experiment,” which led to his belief that human thoughts and words have an effect on the molecular structure of water. Emoto exposed water samples to various emotional stimuli—music, words- both spoken and typed-, pictures and videos in several languages representing both positive and negative thoughts. He found that when the water samples were frozen, those that had been exposed to positive thoughts or words formed beautiful crystals, while those exposed to negative human thoughts or words formed distorted and ugly crystals. He tried different sources of water. Same results. Our bodies are made up of 60% water. If thoughts/words can do this to water, imagine what our thoughts/words do to us. Emoto came to believe that water is the so-called “blueprint of our reality.” Words matter. Remember “sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never hurt you.” I learned this as a child, as it was said to comfort me when someone said something mean to me. But you know what? It’s a lie. Words can and do hurt and can have a negative effect far beyond the healing of a broken bone. People have taken their lives over words. Words matter. You know that. I know that. Most 1st graders know that. James most definitely knew it.

"The tongue has no bones, but is strong enough to break a heart. So be careful with your words" (unknown). Like the small flame, the tongue can

set a whole forest on fire and be restless evil and poison that contaminates our entire lives. It seems these days that the world is on fire. When will we learn and take responsibility for our speech? **The late Dr. Maya Angelou**, distinguished Poet, spoke in an interview on the power of words. She said, "Words are things. I am convinced. You must be careful about the words you use or the words you allow to be used in your house. In the New Testament, we're told in John that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. Words are things. We must be careful. We must be careful with the names we call people. We must not use racial pejoratives or sexual pejoratives and all that ignorance. Don't do that! Someday we'll be able to measure the power of words. I think they're things. They get on the walls and in your wallpaper and into your rugs , in your upholstery, into your clothes and finally into you"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PXdacSqvcA>).

The tongue is a microcosm of the inner self- what comes out is a reflection of what is going on inside the body. "Speech is never just speech; it shapes our views of ourselves and our world" (Holmes). We live in a time where words are easily spoken, written or typed in emails, texts or tweets. Words that cannot be taken back after hitting send. James is calling us out- reminding us that controlling the tongue- though difficult- is not impossible with God's help. Taming the tongue is a spiritual discipline for James and for us, which points to the presence of God in the world. It is more than just learning to bite our tongues or hold them ("If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all"). It's learning, with God's help, to control our

tongues and change our thoughts, which is much harder and much more sustainable. Words matter, friends, and they determine who we truly are. So let's pray for the discipline to choose our words with integrity: words that speak life, lift up our neighbor in the image of God, and align with God's will in Christ. Amen.