

Sept. 30, 2018

Psalm 141: 3; James 3: 1-10

Prayer: Dear God, please help us in our communication with one another.

For such a simple thing that we do every day, it is rife with areas for misunderstanding and hurt. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

So Many Words

I remember when I first heard about the idea for The Weather Channel. I wondered how something that took up five minutes of the nightly news was suddenly going to expand to 24 hours a day.

It's not surprising that those folks live for events like Hurricane Florence.

You probably saw the video of a former Greenville newscaster (who will remain nameless) during the coverage. He was standing on the grass in Wilmington, covered head to toe in a rainsuit, leaning into the wind, staggering from its force, barely able to gasp out his report.

And then behind him, two men in Bermuda shorts strolled by, perfectly upright.

Needless to say, the video went viral. The Weather Channel explained that the reporter was on slippery grass while the pedestrians were on concrete. Didn't really explain why the force of the wind dropped from 80 mph to 10.

I can imagine the memos that went out afterward: *If you are filming a hurricane and somebody ambles into the frame, stop shooting!*

When we have to talk so much, some of it is bound to be silly. Some of it is bound to be misunderstood.

Several years ago, an old high school friend came to town to bury her father. We got together for lunch, and were catching each other up on our families.

Her first husband had died very young, very unexpectedly. Their son was only four years old at the time. And one day, shortly afterward, she said to the boy, "I'm sorry you're so sad."

What she meant was, she'd do anything to take away his hurt.

What he heard was, she didn't want him to show his sadness.

When he became a teen-ager, this boy had all kinds of problems with bad grades and drugs and wild behavior. And when the family went into therapy, what emerged was that old conversation from when he was four: He had tried to hide his grief over his father's death because that's what he thought his mother wanted.

Now, I'm sure that is an overly simplistic rendering. But that's exactly what my friend told me.

How often do we say things that get misinterpreted, that wound, that shatter, that hurt?
How often do we say things that fester?

As a minister of such a public pastorate, I do a lot of talking, both inside and outside the building. I once read a book of essays by a fellow pastor. She wrote about preaching and Sunday morning worship as the focus and high point of her week.

After worship, she said, she goes home, eats lunch, watches some television, and then sleeps and sleeps and sleeps.

And I thought, *WHAT!?* *How do I get that job?*

Our Sundays run 10 hours. Often I'll get home on Sunday night and be absolutely hoarse. So much talking. So many words.

When you talk that much, some of your words are bound to be ill considered.

I have said things I meant to be truthful and honest. But people heard something else. I have hurt people, and I have deeply regretted my words.

Occasionally, I have sat in the parking lot and prayed before coming into the office, because I knew a difficult conversation was coming up. And I have asked God that I *not* wound someone, that I *not* have another encounter to regret.

So much talking. So many words.

Scripture clearly shows that miscommunication is not a 21st- century creation.

Psalm 141: 3 says: **“Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.”**

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Our lips are indeed a door. And that door can open to very different pathways. Those lips can part to reveal loving words that encourage and build up. Or those lips can open to release words most vile and wounding and hurtful.

There was a time here when the language in the dining hall was abusive and coarse and riddled with curses. We attacked that ugly speech right along with physical violence. We knew that ugly words were a precursor to violent action. And so speaking abusively to staff and to each other was the first thing to go.

Gaining control over our tongues is critical when we live in community.

Today's Scripture passage is continued from the short and very practical letter from James in the New Testament.

Please turn in your Bibles to **James 3: 1-10**.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

You know, a lot of time with Scripture, we have to be work to make sure we are translating it accurately to modern life. We learn to read poetry and metaphor and history in the ways that the ancients did. We try to make sure we're talking about apples and apples, not apples and ... camels.

But this passage in James could have been written last week. Its similes and metaphors are completely understandable, completely up-to-date. Horses, ships, fire. We get all of those references.

With the tongue, James says, **“we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”**

When we do that, we are breaking Jesus' foremost commandments: *You shall love the Lord your God*, and *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*.

We can't love God without loving those made in his likeness. We can't speak in glorious terms of God, and turn around and blast our brothers and sisters. Not if we're following Christ, we can't.

I said two weeks ago that Martin Luther and the Reformers of the 16th century didn't think much of James. They claimed there was nothing of the gospel in his letter.

But James is not the only one in the Bible to warn specifically about our speech. Jesus did it, too.

In Mark's gospel, he told the Pharisees that we don't defile ourselves by touching unclean persons and then eating with unwashed hands. We defile ourselves by what comes out of our mouths and our muscles. We defile by our words and our actions.

During my lifetime, and especially in the last few years, there has been such a coarsening of our public discourse. People quite rightly, I believe, link the hatefulness of our public speech and the violence in our public lives.

There was a time I didn't believe that. I am a huge proponent of freedom of speech, and I hate the idea of bridling it. I am nervous about passing laws to confine it.

But I don't think there's any doubt that raving, hateful, ugly language exacts a toll on us. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to television violence, hateful speech, video games, pornography, all those things, have a numbing effect. It's inevitable that what we choose to listen to will filter into our language, our personality, our being.

So not only are we responsible for our tongues, but to some extent, for our ears. We are what we hear. I think that's why we come to church. Deep inside us, there is the hope that we will hear something of God, something that will strike a chord that we can take into the week.

It may be the music, a line from a prayer, a conversation with a seatmate, even a line from the sermon. But we are trying to give our ears something positive, something wholesome, something pertaining to God's love.

The question for us as the church then becomes, How do we speak truth in love?

How do we confront adultery on the local level? Sexual assault on the national level?

How do we react to leaders who lie, who spout hatred and ignorance?

How do we correct when someone smokes crack and lies about it?

There is a fine line we straddle in truth-telling ... without malice. In Christian correction ... without judgment.

James warns of our tongues, our speech, in negative terms. That may have been what he was witnessing in his day. We certainly witness that, too.

But we know that the opposite can be true as well. That words can encourage, can build up, can heal. That's what we try to do with Round Table and with Triune Circles. That's what we try to do with case management and pastoral care and counseling.

I want to tell you about a card I received this month.

But first I have to lay a little groundwork. Years ago, we realized we were dealing with a lot of mental illness and mental disability at Triune. It took us months to get parishioners into Greenville Mental Health, so we raised the money and hired our own mental health counselor.

Hal Stewart was – and is – a wonderful, gentle counselor. If he hadn't been an employee, I would've made an appointment to vent about Vince and his unruly children.

But Hal was never very busy here. People broke at least half of their appointments. Many days he'd sit in his office with no counselees.

We finally figured out that people were gravitating to our social workers instead. So Hal returned to his private practice, and we arranged to pay him by the hour for any Triune parishioners he sees. It was a win-win.

Well, the card I received was from a woman who has been under his care for the past year.

She came to us when she was homeless. She began seeing our social worker Robin and setting goals. But during that time, she became pregnant. And that baby became her whole life. She was even able to get into housing so she could care for that baby.

But at four months old, the baby died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Here's part of what she wrote in the card: "I felt like I had been hit by a tractor trailer ... I was worried about my mental health and well being. Robin referred me to Hal and I've been going regularly for the past year due to (Triune) picking up my fees.

"I wanted to write you a personal thank you because I am so much better this year. I miss my baby more than anything but I'm able to function more normally now than before. If it weren't for Triune giving me the mental support I desperately needed, I'm not sure where I would be. ... So God bless you. Ya'll have renewed, replenished and revived me...."

I shared the card with Hal and the staff because I wanted them to know how much their kind words had meant to this young woman. Helping words. Healing words. Compassionate words.

The tongue that James warns us about can be a tool for good ... or evil. For building up, or tearing down.

When I was on vacation earlier this month, I joined five old friends from college for a week at the beach. After watching the Weather Channel predict Hurricane Florence for two days, we evacuated ... only to find that Fripp Island never got hit at all.

But we simply fled to Lake Oconee in Georgia. We had a year's worth of experiences to catch up on. Parents' and in-laws' deaths. House moves. Retirements. Grandchildren's births. So much talking. So many words.

My old roommate told me about keeping her four-year-old grandson who was enamored of calling everyone "stinky butt." She repeatedly warned him to stop. When he did it again, she washed his mouth out with soap.

"You really did that?" I asked her. I didn't know anybody outside Ralphie's mother in "A Christmas Story" who did that.

She said, "Agh, it had all natural ingredients. It didn't hurt him."

As a nation, maybe we need to wash our mouths out with soap.

Or maybe we need to simply heed the words of the psalmist: *Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Amen.*