

PENTECOST 17B: *Watch Your Tongue!* – 9/16/18
(James 3:1-12)

Words have meaning. They have power; incredible power actually. The ancients, including the biblical writers, were well aware of this. In some ways, perhaps, they understood this even better than we do, I think. Because we often forget that words have consequences – unintended or not; whether it's the words we email or text, or even those we speak out loud.

But people in those earlier times, however, understood that we have to be careful about what we say. Or at least we should, since our words can get us into trouble, and they often do.

A fellow who fancied himself to be a bit of a “ladies-man” was once sitting in the barber’s chair getting a shave with a straight razor, when an attractive woman entered the shop. He immediately started flirting with her, and finally came right out and boldly asked her, “How about a date tonight?” The woman smiled and said, “I’m sorry, but I’m married.”

“That’s no big deal!” said the arrogant man. “Call him up and tell him you’ll be home late.” The woman smiled once again, and replied, “Why don’t you tell him yourself. He’s giving you a shave right now!”

Poorly chosen, inappropriate, or *ill-timed* words can quickly get us into trouble, can’t they?

However, it’s not only words themselves that can get us into trouble, but also the mouths that speak them. For instance, think about all the

current examples of people, especially people who should know better, public figures – whether athletes or entertainers or even *politicians* – who say mean, degrading, hurtful things about others; often on purpose apparently. And, lately, it just seems to be getting even worse and worse in our society.

Every day, in fact, we hear people saying just *awful* things about others. And what's even more concerning is that we've not only grown accustomed to hearing people say these disrespectful, hurtful things, but now very often we actually *applaud* it! Or, at least, some of us do.

In other words, individuals who have absolutely no filter, who merely say whatever nonsense pops into their heads at any given moment, even if it's vicious and cruel, are often held up – in a *positive way*, mind you – as so-called “straight talkers,” or “truth-tellers,” people who “tell it like it is.”

But words, again, have meaning; they have power. As do the mouths that speak them. And there are often hurtful consequences, unintended or not, when unkind or unnecessary words are spoken.

For example, think about the first time, as a child, when you heard a companion say to you, “You're not my friend anymore.” Usually the two of you made up and were friends again in a day or two. But, for those two days, those words really hurt. Didn't they?

Or maybe, like me, you can also remember the hurt and disappointment you felt when your first girlfriend or boyfriend; in other words, the very first person you ever opened your heart up to, said something along the

lines of, “We were just never meant to be,” as they were breaking up with you. That one took a lot *longer* to get over, didn’t it?

But both of these examples completely pale in comparison to something a parishioner once told me, some years ago. She was in her mid-80’s at the time, as I recall, and she was facing an assortment of health issues. And, as we were chatting, she began to reflect back on her life, as people her age often do, recounting all the ways in which she had been blessed during her lifetime; her long marriage, a fulfilling career, her children and grandchildren whom she simply adored.

And then, completely out of the blue – at least for me, she told me how, as a young woman, she couldn’t wait to get married and leave her parent’s home. I didn’t respond or comment, but waited patiently as she paused. And then, after a brief moment, she said to me, “I didn’t have a very good relationship with them. You see, when I was 15 years old, my mother told me that she wished I had never been born...”

Oh man! Seriously?

Now I had no knowledge of the context in which those words were spoken to her. But it doesn’t really matter, does it? I mean, there is absolutely *no context* in which those words are ever justified or appropriate, is there? And here, some 70 years later, the hurt and the pain that those words from her mother had caused her was still visibly etched across her face as she recalled them for me. She had not, she could not, forget them. The pain, the hurt, was still raw... even after all those years. That verbal wound never did heal. That emotional pain never did go away. Even after 70 years!

Remember how, as kids we were all taught: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Well that’s pure hogwash, plain and simple! Words *do* hurt; and they can hurt *badly*. In fact, medical researchers remind us that we are not only wired to experience physical pain but also *emotional* pain. And the *latter*, they tell us, can be just as painful as the former.

Words matter... Words have consequences... Words can cause real and lasting pain...

Well, that’s basically what James is saying in our reading this morning. Even in his day, apparently, and even in the church – the *early* church, mind you, when you might have thought that everything was nearly perfect – *even then*, people apparently said hurtful things *to* and *about* each other.

So much so that, as scholars have pointed out, James actually has the longest section about speech in the *entire* Bible! And, what’s more... it’s in today’s reading as well. Not only that, but someone once noted that 46 of the letter’s 108 total verses – or approximately 43% of them! – touch upon matters of speech in one fashion or another.

Yet James was certainly not the *first* or even the *only* biblical writer to ever say something about the misuse of words and speech. The book of Proverbs, for instance, is *full* of such warnings. For example:

- The more talk, the less truth; (therefore) the wise *measure* their words. (Proverbs 10:19)
- It is foolish to speak scornfully of others. If you are smart, you will keep quiet. (Proverbs 11:12)

- The words of the reckless *pierce* like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)
- The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)
- Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. (Proverbs 26:20)

But there are others as well:

- Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. (Psalm 34:13)
- Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)

Then there's my favorite, again from Proverbs, "The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint... Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues."

Although, I also kind of like the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln who once said, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool... than to open your mouth and remove all doubt!"

So it is into this already existing discussion, then, that James offers his own insights. And what he basically says is this: The human tongue is dangerous; it can even be evil, in fact. All too often, it seems to do much more harm than good, say James. So our only hope, then, is to try and keep it under control to some extent.

Hence, the analogies of the bridle and the rudder. A small bit, he points out, placed in the mouth of a large horse helps us make the animal obey us. Even though the horse is so much larger and stronger than we are.

In much the same way, a relatively small rudder can nevertheless guide even the largest of ships, says James; wherever the pilot *steers it*, in fact. And that's true, even today. For example a Nimitz-class nuclear powered aircraft carrier is over a *thousand* feet long and weighs over a *hundred* thousand tons. Yet one of these behemoths is steered by a pair of rudders, each of which is only 22 feet long, and weighs only *fifty* tons.

The point here, then, is that the tongue similarly needs a guide; like a bridle or a rudder. Why? Because the tongue, even though relatively small – figuratively speaking; in comparison to the rest of the body, that is – nevertheless exerts great influence over our lives.

“The tongue has no bones,” as the saying goes, “but is strong enough to break a heart. So be careful with your words.” Or then there's this one: “Be mindful when it comes to your words. A string of some that don't mean much to *you*, may stick with someone *else* for a lifetime.” And finally, “It is easier to build up a child than it is to repair an adult. Choose your words wisely.” (I thought of that former parishioner when I came across this last one.)

As James *then* points out, a great forest can be set ablaze by merely a small fire; just a spark even. How many wild fires have there been out West, for instance, that are later found to have been started by only a discarded cigarette, or a campfire that was left smoldering?

Well, the *tongue* is a fire, he says. As Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann has written, James uses the image of fire “to dramatize the... destructive capacity of the tongue by way of misrepresentation, slander, or gossip. James would not have had the concept of ‘going

viral,” says Brueggemann, “but he knew that false speech can be inflammatory... (and) disrupt social relationships...”

Now we all make mistakes in speaking, of course, *many* mistakes; as James pointed out earlier, at the beginning of today’s reading. Someone once said, “Mistakes of the tongue have destroyed more people, ruined more marriages, and cost more businessmen their jobs and their futures, than any *other* kind of mistake.” And yet... no one can fully *tame* the tongue, James now points out.

Moreover, think about it, says James. From the same mouth there often comes blessings... but also curses. In other words, both good and bad, blessing and curse, can come from the very same tongue. Which is all the more reason why we need to try and *control* our tongue; to *watch* our tongue whenever we find ourselves tempted to say something that is unkind or untrue.

Wade Hughes offers the following prayer: “God, teach me to control my tongue... and teach me *also* that my ears are not garbage cans for other people’s worthless trash.” Because that’s part of it, too, isn’t it? It’s not just about watching our own tongues whenever we’re tempted to say something cruel or hurtful. It’s *also* about refusing to listen when someone *else* is saying such things as well!

In short: Good words build up. Bad words tear down. The choice is always ours. And as Christians we’re called to always try and speak words that are encouraging and uplifting. To stop and think *before* we speak. Because as Haddon Robinson once observed, “Speaking without thinking is like shooting without taking aim.”

Ken Blanchard, the author and management expert, tells the following story. He does business training all over the country, and he and an associate named Barbara Glands once did some training for some 3,000 grocery workers. They talked about the power of words, and how what you say really does make a difference in people's lives.

Well, about a month later, Barbara got a call from a fellow named Johnny, who had attended that training event. He said to her, "I'm 19 years old and I have Down's Syndrome. And I work as a bagger at a grocery store. After your training, I went back to my store, but I didn't know how to apply what you had said. I liked your talk, but I didn't know what to do with it. So I went home and talked it over with my dad, and we had an idea. My dad and I sat down at the computer, and every day we started looking for things that are encouraging to say to others. If I couldn't find one online, or in a little quote book, I would just make it up. Next we would type up these encouraging sayings six times on the same page, and I would print off fifty sheets, and then cut all of them."

In other words, each night Johnny would end up with three hundred of these quotes. Then, *also* every night, Johnny would sign each one of them personally. The next day at the grocery store, he then put this stack of encouraging quotes right there where he bags the groceries. And after he's done bagging for each customer, he puts one of these quotes of the day, the encouraging word, in their last sack. He makes sure he looks them in the eye and says, "I put something special for you in this sack. I hope it will brighten your day." Johnny apparently does this every single day.

Barbara says that about a month after the call from Johnny, she got another phone call; this time from the manager of that grocery store. “Barbara,” he said, “I can’t believe it! Something really amazing is beginning to happen here. I was walking around the store the other day, and I noticed that while we had lots of checkers at the checkout lines, there was no one there at most of them, except maybe one or two people.

“But at the line where *Johnny* does the bagging, the line went all the way back to the frozen food section! True story!” he said. “So I tried announcing over the intercom that there were other lines that customers could move over to. And I would even walk down the line and tell them that there were other lines open. But people would just look at me and say, ‘No, we’ll wait because we want Johnny’s encouraging word for the day.’ One woman even grabbed me and said, ‘I used to only come to the grocery store once a week or once every two weeks. But now I come all the time. I come and buy something just so I can get Johnny’s encouraging word for the day.’”

About a month after *that*, the same store manager called Barbara *again* and said, “It’s changing the entire culture of our store! Even in the floral department. Used to be whenever a flower was broken, and couldn’t be sold, they would just throw it away. Now they walk out into the store, on their own initiative, and pin these flowers on elderly people or young children, just to brighten their day.

“Listen, he said, “there are a lot of people on the organizational chart at our grocery store, and Johnny is pretty much at the bottom. But I’m telling you, the most important person in that store is Johnny, the bagger! He is speaking words of life. And words of life can change a culture. It can change an entire group of people.”

There *is* an alternative, isn't there? It's to speak words of hope and encouragement and kindness instead.

I had a professor at seminary, a Dr. Bergquist, who used to start each and every class – not to mention each and every sermon he preached – with the very same prayer. It was the final verse of our psalm this morning: Psalm 19 verse 14:

*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord,
my rock and my redeemer.*

It's a prayer that I would commend to *you* as well.

Amen.