

15 September 2024

## Thoughts on Speech

James 3:1-12

We continue our month in the Book of James, reading from James chapter 3, verses 1-12:

*3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For 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. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or 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. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.*

*How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And 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. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.*

Two weeks ago, in our scripture reading from James chapter 1, I skipped over one verse that I didn't want to take time to unpack back then. It's James 1:26: *If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues ... their religion is worthless.* Think about that. Doesn't that feel a bit extreme? I mean, of all things to use as a key measure of faith: if you don't mind your tongue ... your religion is worthless. Doesn't that feel a little harsh? I mean talk is just talk, isn't it? Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me, and all that, right? Maybe James was just using some strategic exaggeration, like big brother Jesus used to do. Except that in today's reading, James goes right back to it. Verses 6-8: *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 ... No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* No, James seems to mean it. Our words, our speech, our tongue can be a demonic force for evil, corrupting and poisoning everything it touches. This is why James says our speech is a clear and crucial mark of the quality of our faith.

Is he right? Is speech really that bad? Well, it can be. Who here knows someone whose life or family or career was destroyed by gossip, by a false accusation, by rumors. I do. More than one. And their stories terrify me, because even if an accusation is proven false, the damage is done. And it happens so fast! Mark Twain once said, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." And Twain lived more than a century ago. Now we have the internet. Speech is no longer passed one-to-one over the back fence. Now it's passed instantaneously to thousands and can be passed to millions in minutes. A woman makes a stupid racist joke on Twitter before boarding a plane to Africa, and by the time she lands, she's a household name around the world and has lost her job. Lying on the internet is so effective that it's become a major industry. Maybe you read this past week about the Tennessee YouTube

influencers who were arrested for allegedly taking millions of dollars to spread a false Russian version of US news to thousands of subscribers. The problem's bigger than just lies, though. It's also cruelty. In schools, bullying has moved from shoving kids into lockers to spreading rumors on the internet. Many of our current wave of teenage suicides begin with a text message from a classmate like, "If I were as ugly as you, I'd kill myself." So, no, speech is not benign. James is right. Speech can be vicious and poisonous and devastating. Sometimes sticks and stones don't sound so bad.

But James is concerned about speech not just because it is so potentially harmful to others. He's equally concerned about the harm it can do to the one speaking. Verses 9 and 10: *With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.* What James is concerned with – good Jew that he is – is *shalom*: wholeness. Or, in our idiom, integrity. What we utter with our mouths cannot be separated from who we are. If we use our mouths to curse people who were made in the image of God as much as we were, that curse is not just words, for the moment that curse is our identity. We cannot be a curse and be a follower of Christ at the same time; we need to be one person. Verse 11: *Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?* You can't have it both ways, James says. You can't sing praise to God out of one side of your mouth while you backbite your neighbor from the other side. You cannot be both of those people, so choose.

The fact that James feels the need to say this means that even in the first century people thought they could separate their essential self from the words they said – oh, it's just words, after all. No, they aren't, James replies. And if people thought that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it's *way* worse in the 21<sup>st</sup>. As many have pointed out over the past twenty years, something happens to many people when they're on the internet, and they say things online that they wouldn't dream of saying to someone's face. Maybe it's the illusion of anonymity: the fact that we're alone staring at a screen gives us the feeling that no one can see us. But I think it's more than that. The conventions of internet discourse incline toward speed and effect rather than thoughtfulness and clarity. The goal is to say something that is striking, pithy, easy to remember and share, and most of all to say it before anyone else does. For all those reasons, people you wouldn't expect it of say things that are coarse or cruel, just because they didn't take time to think it through, and didn't think it mattered. It's just words, after all. And finally, those ill-judged comments are shared by others, who would never say such things themselves, but who apparently believe that it's all right to pass along because someone else did. Whatever the reasons, though, a great many people approach their communication on the internet as if it had nothing to do with who they are as people. If that's what they think, they are wrong.

To summarize, whatever the situation was that prompted James's strong words about speech, it's worse today. As communication has multiplied into *mass* communication, so has the damage it can do. So we need to hear James. But before I move to practical suggestions for us, let us start with a word of grace. James is incredibly black-and-white in this passage: things are all good or they are all bad. But no, not every ill-considered word that we say is a poisonous plague on all creation. Moreover, while it is true that a spring does not give both fresh and brackish water, it is also true that we are not springs. We are complex creatures, made in the image of God, but also fallen from that image. We are in the process of becoming, trying with the Spirit's help to recapture that original blessing, but we ain't there yet. Yes, we are to aim at

perfection, but the fact that we still sometimes fail does not mean we are the toxic spawn of Satan. It means we have to try again. And God is always gracious to those who try again.

So now, what do we do? Here are a few things to keep in mind. First, again, words are not benign. They matter. They can do great harm, so use them wisely. And the first step toward using words wisely is to use them less often. Have you ever noticed the correlation between wisdom and not talking a lot? Think of two people you think of as wise. Am I right? Wise people listen more and speak less. Now this will be hard for some of us to swallow. It's possible that there is someone here today whose every elementary school report card contained some form of the comment, "Mrs. Morris, your son talks too much in class" – or, you know, whatever the last name might have been – but the fact that it's a challenge does not mean that we don't try.

Second, don't lie. This sounds obvious and straightforward, but it's harder than it sounds, because we are surrounded by lies, many of them lies that are custom-designed for us as things that we will *want* to believe. Whatever our preferred news network is, it knows its audience, knows what we want to hear, and tells it to us. Our search engines and social media platforms know us even better than that and will direct us to our own bespoke realities where we will encounter lies that affirm all our favorite opinions. The temptation to repeat those lies uncritically is huge. Don't. Be suspicious of anything that is too perfect, and *do not repeat anything you haven't confirmed*. And, by the way, that includes clicking the "share" button. When you repeat a lie, you are lying.

(Some of you may be thinking, "Oh, I can tell a lie when I hear it." Really? Remember that quotation from Mark Twain I told you about earlier in the service, the one about a lie traveling halfway around the world? Yeah, that was a lie. Mark Twain never said that. I know: I thought he did, too, until I checked it while preparing this sermon. Apparently it goes back to Jonathan Swift, a hundred years before Twain. Just be careful.)

But most of all, reflect on this: your speech, every bit as much as your actions and your beliefs, reflects who you are to others. The things you say – whether in person or by telephone or online – declare to the world who you are. When we gossip, when we criticize others behind their back, when we ridicule others, when we repeat lies or conspiracy theories, we announce to the world that we are part of the fear and hatred and cruelty and anger of the worst of humanity. And when we speak words of care and kindness, when we offer forgiveness or mercy, when we choose to listen in attentive silence, we are declaring to the world that we are servants of God who respect the image of that God that we see in those around us. In verse 2 of our reading, James says, *Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle*. Our journey toward becoming like Christ begins with what we say, and when we can control our tongues, James says, everything else begins to fall into place. Everything we utter is a step of becoming in one direction or the other. Let us pray – a prayer drawn from James 1:17.

*God, let us be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger;  
for in our anger we do not approach your righteousness.*