

Tongues in Training
James 3: 1-10
September 15, 2024
Conklin

A young man came to the great philosopher, Socrates, to be instructed in oratory. The moment the young man was introduced, he began to talk and there was an incessant stream for some time. When Socrates could get in a word, he said, "Young man, I will have to charge you a double fee."

"A double fee, why is that?"

The old philosopher replied, "I will have to teach you two sciences. First, how to hold your tongue, and then how to use it."

Today's lectionary passages fit together like a puzzle piece, all overlapping the same themes. The Proverbs passage personifies Wisdom as female— you may interpret that as you like! In the Greek understanding, Wisdom was often thought of as "Sophia".

1:20 Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.

1:21 At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

1:22 "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"

The Wisdom of Solomon or Song of Solomon reading continues it further:

7:29 She is more beautiful than the sun and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be more radiant,

7:30 for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail

Isaiah gives us some hope with:

50:4 The Lord GOD has given me a trained tongue, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

Last week I told you about hearing and speaking and at first I felt like today I was telling you something opposite. I think our most practical advice is found in today's text from James. The entire Epistle is filled with "practical Christianity".

James is one that tells us to "talk the talk and walk the walk". True faith cannot be just an empty confession with words, but it must be backed up with the way we live. We must make sure that our lives are consistent with what we believe, as well. And our words must also be consistent. Our words are just as important.

There's an old story that the Jewish rabbis tell. As the story goes, one day a rabbi asked his servant to go and buy some good food for him in the market. When the servant returned home, he presented the rabbi with a tongue. The next day, the rabbi told the servant to go the market and buy some bad food. Again, the servant returned with a tongue.

The rabbi then asked the servant why he returned with a tongue on both occasions. The servant answered and said, "Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse."

It's a two way street. It's a double edge sword. Talking out of both sides of the mouth with a forked tongue. Whatever analogy you want to use. James says that's the heart of the matter-- the real rub—is that the tongue we can use to praise God on a Sunday blurts out in road rage in Monday morning traffic.

It was like the little boy who said to his mother, "Mommy, why is it that only when Daddy drives there are idiots on the highway?"

The power to harm, the power to heal. The power to direct. The power to destroy.

When we were children our parents often quoted us the expression, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Sometimes this brought comfort, especially after the callous and thoughtless words of one of our friends or classmates hurt us. But as we mature we begin to see how untrue it really is. The reality is that words can be very hurtful and damaging. They might not hurt us physically as a blow to the body, but they can be even more destructive for their damage does not generally heal as rapidly and as well as wounds we can readily see. The power of words is real and, thus, their use must be recognized and guarded appropriately.

The tongue weighs practically nothing, yet so few people can hold it. Don't try literally. It's a slippery, squishy little thing.

Someone once said, and I like it, "If it's in the well, it'll come up in the bucket." Whatever you drop in the well will come up in the bucket. So our words are a manifestation of what is in our hearts.

One scholar writes: The tamed tongue is a mark of maturity. But only God can tame the tongue. The key phrase lies in verse 8. "But no man..."—emphasis on "man," human, person, emphatic in the Greek—"...can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." We painfully know that we alone ourselves can't *tame the tongue. But we can, with God's help—train it.*

General Robert E. Lee was once asked what he thought of a fellow officer in the Confederate Army, an officer who had made some mean-spirited remarks about him. Lee thought for a moment, then rated him as being very satisfactory. The person who asked the questions seemed troubled. "But General, I guess you don't know what he's been saying about you." Oh yes,

answered Lee. I know. But I was asked my opinion of him, not his of me”.

James acknowledges there is both power and problems. Firstly, the power to direct. The warning about teaching others might come off as harsh. He says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers.” That’s as off-putting for Lay Leadership or even recruiting Sunday school teachers as the famous “better to wear a millstone around your neck” passage. Teaching involves being an example in deed and speech. James suggestion is that you shouldn’t put yourself in a place of being a teacher if you’re not called by God to teach.

But God does give to many the gift of teaching. So why the admonishment? In the early Church, anyone could stand up and speak, sing a song, read a psalm or share an exhortation. So it seems that many of them wanted to teach, but few wanted to learn. If everyone wanted to be a teacher at church on Sunday, then no one would be taught.

James uses two illustrations: that of a bridled horse and a ship’s rudder. In the big strong horse’s mouth, directing it to go where you want it to go, is a little “bit”—a line of metal that controls the horse. It’s small—and yet controls a very large, strong, powerful animal.

In James’ day, ships were not anything in comparison to our ocean liners and cargo carriers but the fundamental concept is remains. If you saw one of these in dry-dock, you’d see how rudder is very small in proportion to the overall size of the ship... But that little rudder can control, guide and direct that ship.

So the tongue can be our greatest asset or our greatest liability. It can’t be tamed, but can be trained. The bigger question is—how? Like anything else we strive for, through prayer. Surrender. Asking for Jesus help: not just what would Jesus do, but what would Jesus **say**.

With the littles and the youth often I turn to an easy mnemonic: THINK—that's the long version. The shorthand is this: ask yourself before you speak. "Is it true?" The Ninth Commandment says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Number two, "Is it kind?" And number three, "Is it necessary?" If the Spirit is controlling you, your speech will be true, kind and necessary.

Engage your mind before you but your mouth in gear, writes another. I leave you with a final thought:

The Indian Jesuit and spiritual writer, Anthony de Mello, tells of a Sufi Bayazid who once commented about himself: I was a revolutionary when I was young and my single prayer to God was, "Lord, give me the energy to change the world." As I approached middle-age and realized that half my life was gone without my changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to, "Lord give me the grace to change all those with whom I come in contact. If I can change my family and friends I will be satisfied." Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, my one prayer is, "Lord, give me the grace to change myself." If I had prayed for this at the outset, I should not have wasted my life.

[Psalm 19:14](#) says "Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer." Pray this prayer. And take this poem as benediction and blessing...

*"A careless word may kindle strife.
A cruel word may wreck a life.
A bitter word may hate, and still,
A brutal word may smite and kill.*

*A gracious word may soothe the way.
A joyous word may light the day.
A timely word may lessen stress.
A loving word may heal and bless."*