

Looking Forward

By Glenn Brumbaugh

“Sticks and stones make break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

That's an age old saying that I'm sure we've all heard.

But is it really true? Are the words we say really harmless?

Certainly the audible sounds don't directly cause physical harm,

but can we really say they cause no pain? Or worse?

When we think about our speech and the words we use,

we often symbolize that action

by referring to a small muscle and organ we all have

that is central to speaking, our tongue.

As our scripture from James points out this morning,

this tiny little part of our body can actually have a tremendous impact.

With that appendage, we can spread great good or great evil.

We have many expressions

that play on the kind of influence we can have with that organ.

“A silver-tongued devil” is one who can use their speech in a crafty way,

to influence others to do things they wouldn't necessarily do.

When somebody says something that makes us uneasy,

we say we have a “bad taste in our mouth.”

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The tongue can clearly be a powerful thing, like the spark that can set a forest alight.

Think of some of the words people have used throughout history

that have influenced the fate of entire nations, and even the world:

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase, "I have a dream...;"

Winston Churchill's speech that ended, "We shall never surrender!;"

FDR saying, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself;"

JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

The list goes on and on.

The tongue can inspire people to be more, to do more, to be lights in the world.

But it can also have the opposite effect.

Some people use their speaking skills to cause great harm.

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Say what you will about Adolph Hitler, there is no denying that he was a skilled orator.

He used words to play on peoples fears and hatred to tragic results.

If you break it down, for every word in his manifesto of hate, *Mein Kampf*,

25 people lost their lives.

Words can hurt. Words can kill.

This is why James makes the point

that we need to be very careful how we use our tongues,

the importance of the words we choose to use.

He reinforces that fact that the tongue

is like the rudder on a ship or the bridle on a horse,

it can literally decide what direction the whole being can take.

And it's not just the individual, as our historical examples point out,

but it can be entire groups of people as well.

There is a strong sense of duality in this reading.

We praise God and curse our fellow human beings.

This sense of opposing traits mirrors one of the main themes of Jewish theology.

In Judaism, each person has two sides,

one that seeks good, and one that seeks evil and sin.

The goal is to live into the good side, and suppress the evil within.

As Jesus further refines this precept,

one has the choice of focusing on the values the world promotes,

or to seek to live into the values of the Kin-dom of God that breaks in.

James makes clear the importance of being vigilant in what we say,

because we will be judged for it.

He tells us that not many should be teachers

because of the influence our tongues can have.

However, is that even possible?

Often this passage is interpreted that we should discern carefully

before entering the ministry of teaching and preaching,

to ensure we have the self-discipline to closely monitor what we say.

But the reality is, we are all disciples,

we are all members of the priesthood of all believers.

Unless we hide our identity as Christians,

we all are public examples of what it means to follow Christ.

We all have a responsibility to try to tame our tongues.

We make the choice between the speech of the world, and the words of God.

The words of the world often are filled with self-importance,

and promote selfish wants and needs.

When we say hurtful things about another,
what is the motivation behind that speech?

In an article in *Psychology Today*, psychologist Frank McAndrew
discusses why we gossip.

He says, "in its rawest form, gossip is a strategy used by individuals
to further their own reputations and interests at the expense of others.

Studies that I have conducted confirm
that gossip can be used in cruel ways for selfish purposes."

Often the negative speech we use serves our own purposes,
it furthers our self-interests.

Unfortunately, it can go further than just one person running another down.

History is full of instances where entire groups of people can be maligned.

Certainly my previous example of Hitler's influence
had grave consequences for Jews, Gypsies, the LGBT community,
and Jehovah's Witnesses to name but a few.

Even in the time of James, groups were stigmatized
based solely on who they were, such as the Samaritans, Gentiles, etc.

It's an age-old problem that has its roots in fear and self-interest.

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What about us? There's always someone worse than us we can refer to isn't there?

Someone that can make us look better.

Someone we can blame for what's wrong around us.

Do we talk about so and so in hushed tones in the church kitchen?

Do we itemize why someone in our family isn't meeting our expectations,

highlighting their faults as we see them?

And then there's social media.

Do we click like or share on that off-color meme

that portrays a political figure in a less than favorable light,

or forward on that email that disparages another?

Don't get me wrong, we have a duty to speak truth to power

when that power uses their tongues for ill.

But the difference can be, are we highlighting the salty water they spew,

or are we attacking who they are on a personal level,

making fun of their inadequacies?

I certainly have my own political leanings

which I make no bones about hiding on my personal media,

but I see so many emails, memes, and posts

that are just downright mean-spirited and personally disparaging,

on both sides of the spectrum.

With the speed and reach of the internet,

one post can reach thousands, and even millions of people if it goes viral.

The writer of James was prophetic when he compared the influence of the tongue

to a spark or a rudder.

It can set mountains ablaze and change the course of the biggest ship,

much in the way words in cyberspace can do today.

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There's a story of a man in a small village

that had been found guilty of starting a malicious rumor about another man.

This rumor was not only untrue,
but had seriously damaged the other man's reputation and family.

As is often the custom in small villages,
the accused was taken before the chief of the village
who served as a judge and would hear the case
and decide the man's punishment if found guilty.

After hearing the facts of the case,
the chief found the accused to be guilty
and was now preparing to sentence the man to his punishment.

The old, wise chief handed the man a large bag of feathers
and told him that his only punishment would be
to place a feather on the doorstep of every person
to whom he had told the rumor.

The man was relieved at such a light punishment
and quickly took the bag of feathers and set about his task.

Four hours later, the man returned to the chief with the empty bag and said,

"I completed your task, sir. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, the wise chief replied. Report to me in the morning
and I'll give you the second half of your punishment."

The man reported the next morning and was instructed
that the second half of his punishment was to gather all the feathers back up
and place them in the bag.

"But sir," the man replied, "didn't you hear the storm
that raged through our village last night?"

Didn't you feel the force of the winds that blew?

It would be impossible to know where those feathers are now."

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The wise old chief raised his index finger and pointed knowingly at the man,

"Now you see, my child, the damage that you have done to another.

For although you told only a few lies here and there,

the storm of gossip took hold of those lies

and spread them far beyond your grasp to undo them.

You can regret what you said, but you can never fully undo what you've said."

The power we wield with our tongues is formidable.

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How do we deal with the temptation to use that power for ill?

Well, Jesus gives us some guidance in our Gospel lesson this morning.

Peter, like all of us at times, found himself focused on his own interests.

He didn't like this talk of Jesus being shamed and publicly humiliated.

He had put everything on the line with Jesus.

And now, there was to be no payout.

He wasn't going to be the right hand man of a triumphant ruler

who establishes a new Israel

and throws off the chains of Roman oppression,

at least not in the human terms he was imagining.

So he challenges and rebukes Jesus, to get him to stop talking this nonsense.

They could lose momentum; people might leave the movement.

Jesus calls him out, tells him to lose this petty, human foolishness

and focus on what really matters, the discipleship he was called to.

If he can't follow Jesus down the path laid out before him,

then he was something to walk away from, to leave in the rear view window.

This discipleship we are offered is not a walk in the park.

As Peter learned, it entails change, sacrifice, and struggle.

Part of that struggle is making the effort to curb our tongues,
to seek to lift up, not to tear down.

It's not an easy road, it's part of bearing our own cross.

Dr. McAndrew, the psychologist I mentioned earlier

also relates that we're hard wired to a certain extent to gossip,

it's one way we share information about each other in community.

What we have to consider is the information we choose to share.

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Is it salty, or fresh? Does it lift up or tear down?

Does it serve us or is it helpful to the greater good of God's way?

Is it looking backwards to the Satan behind us,

or looking forward to the kingdom of God ahead and breaking in around us?

Think about that when you hear some juicy news about your brother or sister in Christ,

or your family, or your neighbor, which would be everybody else.

Give consideration to those comments and opinions you hear on the TV, radio, or internet.

Does sharing that lift those referenced up as a created child of God,
or does it tear another down?

Should the source of that information be put behind us,
with the original silver tongued devil, Satan?

I'd like to close today with a little information concerning the underground seminary
founded by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to oppose the corrupted state church in Nazi Germany.

He had one rule for this new community.

It was that no one should speak about another student in his absence
or to tell the student if he did.

His former students recalled the many times they broke this rule,
and how they learned from their mistakes.

What if we tried to live this way?

We too, may not always be able to keep that rule,
but it would make us think, wouldn't it?

How would you change what you say
if you were in the presence of the person you were talking about,
whether a friend, relative, or public figure?

Better yet, what if you said it with Jesus in the room?

I hope that we make the time and effort to try and tame our tongues,
to see the exponential harm a word can inflict.

May we always speak as if we were in the presence of God, because we kind of are. Amen.