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Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JAMES – II: WATCH YOUR MOUTH

### JAMES 3:1-12

The Book of James is probably about the most practical book in the New Testament. The author doesn't waste time with any heady theological arguments. He does offer some good, practical, down-to-earth advice -- advice that we can use every day. The Book of James was written for people who had just been converted to the Christian faith. Therefore they needed some counsel on how to apply the Gospel to their daily lives.

James 3:1-12

3Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.<sup>2</sup>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.<sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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! <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.<sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Prayer for illumination

God of Courage, be in our speaking. Be also in our listening, and speak to our souls' deep understanding. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

## WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Linguists from the University of Arizona recently did a study which revealed that each of us speaks about 16,000 words every day<sup>iii</sup> (Yes, I believe pastors were not included in this study to balance the curve.)

As we continue our studies the book of James, it should come as no surprise that of the nearly sixty commands found in this letter, over half address the issue of our speech.

### I Three Images

James is saying -Watch your mouth. He employs three images. First, that of a horse, suggesting that by putting a bit into the mouths of horses we gain control of their magnificent and powerful bodies. By controlling the tongue, everything else may be manipulated. But if the tongue is left unbridled, the whole of life is in a state of chaos and un-control.

Using the image of a rudder on a ship, James provides us with yet another vivid illustration. A rudder is very small in comparison with the great size, bulk and weight of a ship; and yet, by exerting pressure on that little rudder, anyone can alter the course of the ship, directing it to a safe haven, or a perilous rocky shore. The rudder is small, yet it can direct the course of the whole ship. The tongue is small, yet it can direct the course of the whole body and life of a person.

James goes on to mention a third image. He suggests the tongue can cause damage like a forest fire. The picture of the forest fire was common in the Bible. In the dry season, the scanty grass and low-growing thorn bushes were as dry as tinder. If they were set on fire, the flames would spread like a wave which there was no stopping. The implication of this image is twofold: First, the impact of the tongue can be wide ranging. One cruel word, one untrue story repeated, is passed on and spreads to infect a whole community and more. Secondly, once this happens, things are virtually out of control, like a raging fire.

### II Measure and Monitor Words

Through these three images James is saying - Watch your mouth.

There is a Scottish saying that goes like this: "Three things come not back: the spent arrow, the spoken word, and the lost opportunity." Once a word is spoken, there is no getting it back. The Chinese proverb says it well: "A word rashly spoken cannot be brought back by chariot and four horses. Like toothpaste out of the tube, we can never put them back. What we say can take on a life of its own.

Every word you speak suggests your veracity, your sense of identity, and integrity. Words are the pencil lead making their mark on the paper of life. Each word you utter either heals or hurts. The tongue is a clue to our souls, and our inner thoughts. Out of the mouth comes either praise to God or cursing of others as indicators of the inner heart.

There is nothing more impossible to kill than a rumor; there is nothing so impossible to obliterate as an idle and malignant story. James says: "There is no sin into which it is easier to fall, and no sin which has graver consequences, than the sin of the tongue." In the book of Proverbs, this thought is reinforced with these words: "A soft answer turneth away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger. . . A wholesome tongue is the tree of life; but perverseness therein is a breach of the spirit." (Proverb 15:1-4)

There is an old German folk story telling of a boy who was speaking unkindly of other people. His father had him take a bag of goose feathers and fling them out of the second story window. The wind swirled them into the corridors and alleys. Then he said to the boy, "That is the way your words go out into society. Now go out and pick up all the loose goose feathers." The boy cried: "That is impossible!" "So it is impossible to take back the words you have uttered," said the father. *Watch your mouth.*

### III Say What Needs To Be Said

James is saying, watch your mouth in regards to all things left unsaid. Abraham Lincoln once observed: "It is better to keep your mouth shut and let people wonder whether you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt." But this is not what James is saying. He wasn't insisting that cowardly silence was better than speech but rather that control in speech was what we need.

But there are the sins of omission where we neglect to speak up when an injustice is committed; When we fail to acknowledge people's efforts and articulate our appreciation; When we fail to affirm each other as friends and fellow communicants in Christ's household.

Mark Twain once said: "A powerful agent is the right word." The Bible says: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pitchers of silver." (Proverbs 25:11) So great is the encouraging power of a word. Seneca said that a word is an index to your mind and heart. It tells exactly what you are. Every word that you speak can be a ministry of healing for Jesus Christ. Your ministry and mine is to speak more kindly and gently because Christianity is a distinctive religious life of love in the midst of a world engaged in harsh cruel verbicide. We cheat ourselves with an over-abundance of silence, with tongues poisoned with clamor, bitterness, growling and complaining. Monday morning I got a note to return a call to Chris Lougyear. I'm always ready for about anything. But I admit I was not completely ready for what Chris had to say. "I'm a long term member, but I don't get there much anymore... I haven't met you. But I'd like to thank you for the article you wrote for the Good News. It really helped me understand this entire transition process." I looked at the receive and said to myself .... "WHAAAAAAAAT!?" It was a cup of cold water to a thirsty guy.

Our ministry is to express Christ's love with our words. The tongue is our index to the dynamics of a faith which can reveal the beautiful and good and noble. As Christians, we should make ourselves known by the true, the good, the pure, the just and the beautiful in our speech. We don't have to be ponderous, but should aim to be illuminative and trustworthy, insightful and spiritually incisive and ever affirming.

The gospel according to James says it succinctly: *Watch your mouth*. Now as a I minister to you, I shall watch my mouth and follow the old Scottish Presbyterian Parson's preparatory prayer:

Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff

And nudge me when I've said enough. . .

Amen

as reported by ABC News July 5, 2017