

### “The Power of the Tongue to Hurt or to Heal”

Sermon notes by the Rev. Arnold Bush, Priest in Charge, Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, Tallassee, AL, September 16, 2012, Proper 19, Cycle B.

Text: James 3:1-12 (especially v.10) “From the same tongue comes blessing and cursing. Does a spring have both fresh water and brackish water?”

#### I Introduction, Hurt or/and Heal

“The Power of the Tongue to Hurt or to Heal” is the topic for today from the Letter of James 3. First, let’s see the destructive power of the tongue, then the need for self-control, and finally how we as followers of Christ need to use our words for healing.

#### Two stories of destructive power of the tongue

Imagine this scene in another congregation: A couple comes in for marriage counseling. He is a tall, quiet man who enjoys deer, dove, and turkey hunting in South Alabama and is very successful as a builder. He likes the outdoors, is skilled in all kinds of carpentry work, and has three or four crews working for him. His petite wife is a very successful business person who oversees the marketing and sales for the company. He says, “I am having difficulty with my wife; she is so quick to criticize me with sarcasm, with the tone of her voice, and is always putting me down. In the conversation he is elaborating on a family incident, but she cuts into his monologue correcting the details and saying, “You do not remember what was going on; your memory is too selective.” He said, “Look Father, I love my wife, but her sarcastic tongue is killing me.” Sarcastic communication within the family is not an effective way to communicate.

I recall his stating, “My wife is a very smart, articulate person, but she does not have control of her tongue.” In the James lesson the topic is TAMING THE TONGUE AND THE NEED FOR SELF-CONTROL OF THE TONGUE. Have you ever needed to CONTROL YOUR TONGUE WHEN ANGRY OR HURT? DO YOU KNOW OTHERS WHO NEED TO LEARN TO CONTROL THEIR TONGUES?

A second story comes about lack of tongue control, from my wife, Zoe, who taught a special education class for emotionally disturbed teens in Taft High School in San Antonio. The students in her room could easily become angry, frustrated and act out in behaviors that could not be tolerated. Some of the students frequently used the “s” and “f” words; these were 15 students in a school of 2,000 who had no control over their tongues or destructive behavior. Today’s world of technology has given additional power to those who use their tongues destructively, via the internet, as students post negative, malicious untruths to alienate their circle friends from a student they dislike

#### III The images of the Power of the Tongue in James 3

The tongue is a very small organ with a great deal of power.

#### Placing a bit into the mouth of a horse:

In growing up, my family had a pony, Tony, and several other horses on the Bush Dairy Farm. I recall being told always to place the bridle into Tony’s mouth before attempting to ride him. When my children were small, we would drop by to see our niece who was about 5 feet 2

inches tall who was riding her show horses. Trish would always say, "I have to get the bit into its mouth and then I can control this 6 foot plus horse." James 3: "We can put small bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us."

The second image is the small rudder guiding a large ship. The pilot of the ship can direct the ship by moving the rudder, but what happens if you are in some high winds out 5 miles fishing on the Gulf and the mechanize rudder controls break?

Or, we have been reading about the large forest fires in CO and CA in the past weeks. Most of them started by small flames, a lightning strike or a campfire igniting the out of control forest fires and burning entire villages and hundreds of acres of timber.

James states that human beings have tamed almost every beast of creation, but they do not seem to be able to tame the human tongue. The word tongue is mentioned over 92 times in the Bible but is mostly used for destructive power.

Listen to Proverbs 15:4 "A deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."

Jeremiah the prophet says, "Their Tongue is a deadly arrow."

We read in today's lesson, James 3:8, "No one can tame the tongue... a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

#### IV The Untamed Tongue and the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment

When I am listening to a political speech on TV, watching a documentary, listening to talk radio, or reading a few forwarded e-mails, I am reminded to place my "critiquing hat" on. As I attempt to critique someone, the Ninth Commandment comes to mind: "THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOR"

The Prayer Book, Catechism has this paraphrase of the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment: "To speak the truth; and not to mislead others by our silence." Another translation of the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandment: "Do not accuse anyone falsely."

Our civil society depends on communizing the truth. Deceit, contempt of court, spreading falsehoods, stretching the truth, lack of credibility, are all behaviors that can destroy the civil society.

When I read a letter to the editor, or receive a "political" e-mail from a friend, I ask myself, "Are these reports coming forward factual, and based on scientific survey or study, or is this simply THEIR OPINION? THESE PEOPLE STATE THEY ARE CHRISTIANS WHO DESIRE TO PRACTICE THE 10 COMMANDMENTS, but they do not seem to understand or care about "bearing false witness" or with the truth of the event. In my opinion these people are bearing "false witness."

Example: In the diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, the bishop asked me to serve as interim rector where there was a lot of conflict and distrust going on. Accusations flew in every conversation, blaming the vestry officers with deceit. People were divided over the proper roles of the parochial school and the vestry. Parishioners came to vestry meetings with their laptops taking notes for their side of the vestry. I had one person taking the official minutes, but a "visitor" was also typing the flow of the discussion. Later he would put his spin on what was happening and then the next day, send out his comments using negative descriptions such as "stupid, idiot, bullheaded" referring to the vestry members not on his side. After a few months of this, I demanded that no e-mails about the vestry are to be written except the official

minutes. I am glad to report most of the conflict was resolved within one year. I learned and observed how the power of negative and false accusations could hurt so many parishioners.

#### V Sticks and Stones may break bones, but words will never hurt me.

I recall growing up and using this proverb, "Sticks and...." In a sense, this is true, but, also it is not true. Words do hurt! Strong negative words can hurt deeply. Husbands and wives can hurt each other. Using words that attack the personality, such as, "You are just stupid; you are so uncaring, you are such an inconsiderate person," do injury to the relationship.

If criticizing your spouse or close friend, always use a word that describes the behavior and not the person. "I wish you would not eat the crackers in bed, dear." Not, "You are such an inconsiderate, uncaring person with those cracker crumbs in the bed."

Application for church life: Gary McIntosh, in "*Beyond the First Visit*," refers to a study about negative stories. He states, "Three parishioners are willing to share a positive story about their church. But thirty-three are willing into share a negative story about their church." McIntosh suggests to "energize good rumors" for Church of the Epiphany. If you tell a negative story about our congregation, the story may be passed to 32 others. Let us pass positive stories to our friends. This congregation does have some upbeat positive membership and although we do have personal illnesses and problems, we do experience the power of Christ in our lives.

#### VI Let Blessing flow out of our mouths.

How do we increase using our tongue for Healing and Praise?

1. In Worship: We are letting the deep thanksgivings and gratitude of our hearts come forth through our tongues. If we really, look at our liturgy of the Eucharist, it is one big act of praise. The singing, the prayers, the Consecration of the elements, are all acts of praise. Doing this on Sunday encourages us to praise God during the week.
2. In the epistle four weeks ago, we read these words from St. Paul: Eph.5:19, "*Speak go to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Are you submitting yourself to the Holy Spirit daily? Are you making melody in your heart as you sing and say praises to the Lord Christ? Do you have a running conversation with Christ with some "Thank you Jesus" throughout the day? Some spontaneous "Praise God!" How are you in giving out blessings and praises to colleagues at work or leisure? In Ken Blanchard's little book called the *5 Minute Manager*, he recommends that the supervisor or superior give positive affirmation, either written or verbal, immediately when it applies, but make sure it is sincere and coming from appreciation. When I am responding to e-mails, I like to write a line or two referring to what I appreciate about them. Thursday, while typing this sermon, a tennis buddy called to see how I was doing after my fall on Wednesday. I appreciated his calling. I got one email from a man with whom I do Habitat work who said, "Sorry you got cut on the asphalt, but I did not know tennis was a contact sport." Another friend

who is a graduate of Auburn School of Architecture asked, "Did you hit yourself with a cow bell at the game?"

3. Within your family: In my family of origin, my parents did not verbalize appreciative remarks or verbalize a "thank you." I had to learn to say thank you to members of my family and congregation. In my marriage I learned "not to sit on the positive thought" but to be more spontaneous in my expressions. When we have children, both grown children and grandchildren, some of us get into the "Critical Parent Mode." Maybe a child needs some negative feedback, but I (we) need to be more attentive to letting our tongues give more words of affirmation. In a course on "Emotional Maturity," I learned "An ounce of prevention is a word of appreciation," which taught me to look for something positive to verbalize with family members and grandchildren. Zoe is better at this than I am.

#### VII How can all this be applied?

- A. Write down some words that spring to mind for both good and bad ways to use your tongue.
- B. When you are angry, do you tend to direct destructive words to those persons whom you think caused you to be angry? Paul said, "Be angry and sin not."
- C. Can you make melody in your heart at various times during the day? Are you turning your life over to Christ so he can enhance your self-control?
- D. What areas in your life do you need to "tame or bridle your tongue?" James 1:26
- E. Where can you improve in expressing appreciation among your church and family relationships?

Prayer: " Thanks for reminding us about our tongues..."