

Christ Church + Washington Parish  
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli  
September 16, 2018, James 3:1-12  
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B<sup>1</sup>

This may come as a surprise to you or to some other Christians – it certainly did to me – but no other body part gets as many instructions in the Bible as the tongue. Really the tongue. The James passage today is all about the tongue, but there are many others . . .

“Do all things without complaining and disputing.” (Philippians 2:14)

“My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the utterance from my heart will give understanding.” (Psalm 49:3)

“The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life; but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked.” (Proverbs 10:11)

My children criticize me for cursing too much. They are correct. I curse a lot. I always have. When I had young children, I was worried that if I cursed around them, they’d pick it up and repeat it in some embarrassing fashion. But no resolution or counting to ten or developing some benign spin-off curse word worked to curb this bad habit. Humanity has tamed the world of nature in many ways, James observes, “but no one can tame the tongue.” His words comfort me – well some of them.

Others are particularly challenging – the tongue “stains the whole body,” . . . it is a “restless evil full of deadly poison.” “From the same mouth come blessing and curse, this ought not to be so.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

Well it is so, James. The same mouth here that curses out of frustration and anger, also blesses out of love and gratitude. The same mouth blesses God and, depending on what you mean by curse, but if you mean diminish the value of, then sure I do that too, of some of God's people who walk this earth with me too. And I don't need to hold a confession hour to know that many of you are with me. James wants to make it clear cut and yet knows it isn't. Who cares what the spring can or can't do, the tongue can't be tamed so a tongue indeed can say both refreshing and salty words.

But should it? Should is an interesting word because it is aspirational. It looks to the future. It invites change. James is inviting change in his passage. He's inviting Christians to think about the power of their words. A sentence passing from your lips can ring in the ears of another for decades. Words can tear people down. They can build division. They cannot be unsaid. The tongue's small size belies its powerful influence – like a bit that controls a horse or a rudder that steers an enormous ship.

Words can also shape how we see the world. Regularly in her presentations, a prominent linguist would ask her audience to close their eyes and point north. Hands shot up around the auditorium, aimed in all possible directions. This happened among scholars at Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, at presentations in Moscow, London, and Beijing. Hands aimed in every direction. But when she traveled to a community on the western shores of Australia's Cape York, she discovered that children as young as 5 can point north at all times with absolute precision. This is because of the aboriginal language in that region of Australia.

In the Western world we use relative spatial terms. You might complain that a stranger cut in “front” of you or ask someone to step “aside” or instruct someone to move to the “left” or “right” but in this aboriginal language, along with a third of the world’s languages, uses cardinal directions, which direct toward the four points on a compass, to discuss space. Someone speaking one of these languages might say something like, "My knife is southeast of my plate" or "Jackie is standing to the north of Trisha." If we talk about north, we will think about north. If we don't, we won't.

Linguistic research reveals that words shape not only our thoughts, but also our behavior patterns. English-speakers prefer active verb construction. "Sarah wrecked the car" instead of passive "The car was wrecked". But if someone speaks a language like Japanese or Spanish, they often prefer a passive construction. Which is to say, the agent of causality is usually dropped, even if someone was at fault. The result is that people who speak languages like English more readily blame others. Just as speaking about north conditions someone to think about north and behave with north in mind, so too does speaking about blame condition someone to think and act in corresponding ways. Linguistic research has even uncovered that those who speak active languages like English have developed an approach to criminal justice bent towards punishing transgressors rather than restituting victims.<sup>2</sup>

So words make a difference in shaping our worldview, ideas, and even actions. The power of our tongues to build up and tear down, to edify or do damage are not just emotional. Perhaps then it should be concerning to us as Christians that many of the words associated with Christian faith are fading from us. I’m not just talking churchy words like righteousness or mercy or

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<sup>2</sup> Both examples of linguistic influence are from Jonathan Merritt’s article in The Week, <http://theweek.com/articles/791795/death-sacred-speech>

forgiveness, though those are fading as well, but words that embody the fruits of the Spirit – the virtues of Christian living. In a study of printed works made searchable by the wonders of google, a study identified 50 words associate with moral virtue and found that 74% were used less frequently over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Certain types of virtues were especially hard hit. Usage of gratitude words like “thankfulness” and “appreciation” dropped by 49 percent. Usage of humility words like “modesty” and “humbleness” dropped by 52 percent. Usage of compassion words like “kindness” and “helpfulness” dropped by 56 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The decline of civil discourse has been a popular rant in the last few years. I, along with others, have been shocked how in a few years it has become barely newsworthy for people in respected positions in our country to say awful things. A tamed tongue, at one time an accepted sign of basic maturity, is no longer, leading one to wonder about the importance of James’ teaching today. I can just imagine James’ response: Why in the world are you looking to public discourse as the standard for Christian practice? Is public discourse supposed to guide our faith? In our history, sometimes our political discourse has been civil and sometimes it has ended in duels and brawls, but never has it been a guide for Christian behavior.

So what is the guide for Christian speech? Completely taming the tongue may be out of reach, but incorporating language into our everyday parlance that shapes our worldview and actions and those around us is within our power. Our words can build a better world along the lines of the teachings of Jesus. They can shape how we view and interact with the word. It is definitely wise to think before you speak, and if you don’t have anything nice to say to not say anything at all,

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<sup>3</sup> David Brooks, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/opinion/brooks-what-our-words-tell-us.html>

but it's also good to be intentional about the words that come from your lips on an everyday basis. How do you want the world around you to be shaped?

Gratitude - Thank someone every day.

Mercy and forgiveness - Say I'm sorry when you hurt someone, intentional or not.. Accept when people mess up, and let them know that you don't think their mistakes define them.

More acceptance and less culture of critique - When sharing an opinion, follow some good advice popular in the preschool set - Don't yuk someone else's yum

Pray about what to say. You might be surprised about the words that the Spirit puts on your tongue. And even if the words don't come, the humility with which you say them may be the touch that is needed.

Such practices may not prevent every slip-up but they will put a lot of good into the word. They will give people experiences of Jesus' teachings through your words. Just as our words have the power to do harm, they also have the power to turn a heart towards God, even when the word God is never mentioned. It seeps into the heart and worldview into people and that affects action. In the last chapter of James that we read last week, James says that "faith without works is dead." This week he is adding to it – faith without words is also dead. Perhaps the kingdom of God is built, in part, with words.