

The Tale of the Tongue

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

20 September 2009

Text: James 3:1-12

Any one of you could preach this sermon. The tale of the tongue, or how the power unique among all God's creatures—the ability to use language—is the source of both blessing and curse. We all know the terrible truth that words once spoken can never be retracted, and not one of us can say we have no regrets about things we have said. All of us have spoken words of hurt and hatred; we have lied and gossiped; we have cut and criticized. And all of us know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of such speech, and how it breaks the bonds between us.

The tale of the tongue does not end with individuals, however. Its story includes our decidedly uncivil society, and the venom spewed on radio and TV and Internet. The destructive power of speech can be seen in the nasty spats of competing talk show hosts, trash-talking sports stars, and snarky political commentators with equally vicious offerings on both FOX and CNN. Religious leaders are not above reproach either, with self-righteous pronouncements and narrow judgments that run roughshod over common courtesy, respect and kindness. We've forgotten how to conduct civil discourse on the public level, in favor of trading verbal punches and catchy sound bites that mask rather than reveal truth. As a result, we are diminished as a nation, divided and distressed. Certainly deception, error, and slander have always been with us; but now language reaches farther, faster, inciting a world of trouble that is not virtual, but all too real.

Language was one of the first gifts God gave to humans and so its use is a spiritual matter. Judeo-Christian faith recognizes the power of speech not simply to reflect reality but to create and shape it. In fact, it names the life-giving, foundation-shaking, truth-telling divine person as the "Word of God." We sometimes mistakenly equate the almighty Word of God with the fallible human words of the Bible, but these words only become the Word when we encounter the living Spirit of Jesus Christ within them. (That's why when we read Scripture in worship, we never say "Listen to the Word of God," but rather, "Listen *for* the Word of God;" that is, we seek to discover the way, the truth, and the life hidden within these culturally-bounded, permeable, puzzling pieces of translated religious texts.)

Our morning text confronts the promise and the peril of speech head-on. We know almost nothing about the first-century letter writer, nor can we identify the church to which it was first addressed. But I will be very surprised if we cannot locate ourselves within its colorful metaphors and astute analysis. Listen, then, for God's Word....and perhaps a new chapter in the tale of the tongue. A reading from the letter of James in the third chapter at the first verse. [JAMES 3:1-12]

Communications 101: A husband found himself in big trouble after forgetting his wife's birthday. She told him, "All right buster, tomorrow there had better be something in the driveway for me that goes from 0 to 200 in 2 seconds flat or you're in for it!" The next morning the wife rushed to the window and saw a small, but elegantly wrapped package in the driveway. Puzzled, she went out and retrieved the package, and opened it to find.....a brand new state-of-the-art bathroom scales. *How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!*

The cautionary tone of the biblical text is not for nothing! Human communication is a field with many landmines that calls for careful negotiation. And this among people, the author writes, "who make many mistakes." (and don't write this text off as simply advice for the brave souls who become classroom teachers. Fact is, every single one of us is a teacher by virtue of our words and our example)

What's to be done? Notice the text doesn't say "shut up" (though there are times when silence may be the most appropriate response). Instead, the author uses a series of metaphors to describe disciplined speech that builds up, rather than destroys. He speaks of controlling our language the way a rudder controls the direction of a ship; of bridling our words, of refining our words, of cultivating our speech to produce honest fruit and purifying it so it bubbles up with refreshment.

As evocative as these metaphors are, they're not very prescriptive. James doesn't give us much in the way of practical suggestions to help us put out the forest fire or at least reduce it to a controlled burn. I wanted "ten tips to tame the tongue" or something like the Rotary Club's "three way test:" Is it kind? Is it true? ----- Even the Golden Rule provides some guidance, if we resolve to speak to another the way we would like to be spoken to. No one could argue with that! Except...we know it but we don't do it! Time and again our actual speech doesn't measure up to its deceptively simple standard. Even James scratches his head about the mouth from which both blessing and curse pour forth.

The key I think is found in the idea that what comes out of a person's mouth reveals what is within the person. You can't get figs from an olive tree. You can't get fresh water from the ocean. To get wise and loving words, you have to get to the heart of the matter; which is to say, you have to get to the heart and see what is there. James' analogy is reminiscent of Jesus' own words, *The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good; the evil person out of the evil treasure of the heart produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.* [Luke 6:45]

For most of us, there are plenty of both in our heart-of-hearts: impulses toward generosity and kindness, as well as a simmering boil of anger and resentment and fear. We are full of what we take in; messages that perpetually seep under our skin and take up residence in our consciousness so subtly we hardly know until we hear them come out of our mouths. Or our children's. Words that demean. Words that trivialize what is important. Shrill messages about the "other" that are prejudiced or stereotypical. Gossip. Careless words that reinforce barriers among people. Messages that place the self in the center of the universe. Messages about what is necessary for the good life. Messages that clog our heart with the lard of self-absorption, godlessness, and futility, and lead to spiritual death.

Friends, it's not fair to decry the state of language in our society without recognizing our part in perpetuating it—and our responsibility to change it. To examine our own hearts for the messages we find there and how they get expressed in our lives and relationships. We'll find we're all due for some speech lessons.

When little children are first learning to speak, they become easily frustrated and may respond to stress or hunger or tiredness by reverting to non-verbal crying or whining. In those times, the parent will often say calmly "Use your words." Difficulty and discomfort and need are best addressed through clear and effective communication. Especially to one who loves unconditionally, who desires only good for her beloved children.

The struggle to "use our words" lasts a lifetime. Our speech lessons begin with the recognition of our spiritual condition. The God before whom nothing is hidden desires to heal our hearts. You can hear the relief in the reminder of God's grace by best-selling Christian author C.S. Lewis: "We can lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us." [Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm, Harvest Books, 1983, p. 22*] Lay it there and let it go in order to learn a new language.

And practice it! God invites us to "use our words" to pray, to sing, to praise, to bless, to thank, to forgive. Sometimes this language comes easily. Other

times not so much. As I was preparing this sermon, I found it much easier to think of examples of the untamed tongue and the toxic public interactions we see and hear so often these days, than I did of positive ones. It's news when a congressman interrupts the president's speech with a shouted accusation, or a singer disrupts an awards ceremony. But we are far better instructed by observing our own conversation more carefully. I admire the commitment of a colleague who consciously works to rein in her sarcastic comments, frightfully clever though they can be. I appreciate the courage of an elder who spoke up at a meeting recently on behalf of an underserved part of our congregation. I look forward to lunch this week with a church member who disagreed strongly with my recent sermon on health care, but who wants to talk about it—and said when he called “I have some things to say....and I want to listen too!”

Friends, the tongue can curse, but it can also bless. And bless in powerful ways. Our words bless when we remember others in prayer, when we give thanks, when we say “The peace of Christ be with you.” Our words bless when we call one another by name, when we welcome a stranger, when we make the effort to listen rather than simply preparing our next response. Our words bless when we witness to what's true in our lives, what is good and just and lovely, and when we admit and don't deny what is wrong and unjust and distorted. “No” can sometimes bless when it is a refusal to go along with evil; “yes” when it signals a willingness to take up a new call. Our words bless when we remember that the purpose of communication is to gain understanding and connect us more closely with others, not to win an argument, to triumph over an imagined foe. A more civil society begins by paying attention to our own speech. Taming the tongue starts at home.

But it takes practice. And something more.

A good deal of the premarital counseling conducted before marrying couples in this church concerns communication. We talk about the differences between “Mars” and “Venus,” the importance of affirming each other, and how to handle conflict. But perhaps none of these lessons are as crucial as learning two small sentences: I'm sorry. I forgive you. Often I can see the couple think this is very quaint and entirely unnecessary: they love each other and have hardly ever had even a disagreement! Well, you know where this is going. None of us is perfect. We sin both with our speech and with our silence. Nothing is more important to harmonious relationships with imperfect people than the language of confession and forgiveness. To ask forgiveness, to grant it, to receive it from another, and then to give each other the grace of a new beginning, a clean slate.

Friends, the tale of the tongue, finally, is a love story as old as faith itself: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. May that love be born in our hearts and may it find voice in our speech. Amen.