

As we've studied the Book of James together, I've made it a point to point to the author's extensive use of the books of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures. This morning's passage is no different. Warnings against a loose or wicked tongue are common in Judaic literature. Psalm 120, for example, says "In my distress I cry to the LORD, that he may answer me: "Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue." What shall be given to you? And what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue? A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!" I know it's rather vogue these days to have one's tongue pierced, but the Psalmist doesn't make it sound like very much fun at all! Proverbs has a huge number of verses about babbling, lying and wicked speech. Proverbs 10:19 says, "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech." This sort of advice of restraint was common in the Greek-speaking world, as well. Dionysius the Elder, the playwright and general of Syracuse, wrote: "Let thy speech be better than silence, or be silent." That sounds rather like the sage words of Abraham Lincoln which I quoted two weeks ago: "Better to keep silent and be thought a fool that open your mouth and remove all doubt."

James begins his admonitions about watching what we say with a particular word to teachers. Now, why should this be? Some people might say that self-control with respect to words is harder for teachers than others. Perhaps having a captive audience goes to the heads of some and leads them to offer opinions as fact or to proclaim on subjects in which they are not qualified. Mary Hinkle of Luther Seminary in St. Paul rather kindly suggests that James starts with teachers because they, "like preachers, make their living with words, and so the likelihood of error is greater for them. With access to so much rope," she writes, "it is only a matter of time before we professional speakers hang ourselves." I think I can safely assent to the truth of that statement, at least as it applies to me.

James, of course, is referring specifically to Christian teachers, teachers in the Church. It seems to me that at least part of his warning has to do with the idea that we who teach in the Church have taken on the rather significant responsibility of interpreting the word of God for our brother and sisters, of standing as God's representatives. In his commentary on this passage, John Shearman points out that James' warning can be taken to apply to any community leader who stands as a representative of the people or of a business or some interest group. Think, for example, of how we have endowed our athletes or entertainers with the mantle of community hero and how often some of them have failed us by letting their tongues wag without due thought. A few years ago, Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker essentially saw his career come to an end after some ill-considered and highly inflammatory remarks about New York City. Basketball coach Bobby Knight talked his way out of his long tenure at the University of Indiana. Tom Cruise also lost a lucrative contract with a major film studio after a series of bizarre pronouncements and Mel Gibson recently set off a firestorm of controversy that is almost certain to damage his career with his drunken tirade against Jews. For those in the public spotlight, it is especially important to bridle the restless tongue.

Robert Roth, in an article for Sojourners Magazine, casts the net of public leadership even wider. The world, he reminds us, both rich nations and developing nations, "is saturated with the words, ideas, and media from the U.S." That places our whole culture in the position of world leadership in the media. What sort of messages is America sending to the world, how are we being represented? Is it easier to understand the disdain that many people in the world feel for

the United States when we reflect on the shallow, sex and violence addicted, consumer lifestyle that our television programs, movies and other media too often portray as “the American way of life”? Acting may, as Hamlet told us, “hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature,” but is the mirrored image our media is showing to the world warped and cracked by expectations of “what sells”?

Ultimately, though, there is greater responsibility for leaders in the church. Pope Benedict XVI and his remarks two days ago in Germany are dominating the headlines and airwaves. After an irenic beginning to his papacy, which relieved many of those who were concerned about his leadership following his years as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Benedict now seems to have reverted to the “Rottweiler mode” he so often displayed during John Paul II’s papacy. We can only pray that his attempts at apology will still the violent storms of protest.

But, really, you don’t need to be a world leader, a sporting hero or a star of the silver screen to get in trouble with your tongue. All of us have given in at some point in our lives to the temptation to lie, to gossip, to use hurtful words. And all of us, I am sure, have felt the consequences of those words in our lives. As James says, anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking must be perfect; it’s that hard to do. There’s an old saying that a mature Christian is one who would not hesitate to sell their talking parrot to the town gossip. A couple of weeks ago, I read a story about a woman who once went to St. Francis of Assisi and asked what she had to do to be forgiven for her gossiping. St. Francis told her to take feathers and place one at the doorstep of everyone she had spoken ill of in the town. She did so and returned to the wise saint. Francis told her to then go and retrieve all the feathers. When she attempted to do so, they were all gone -- the feathers were scattered all around town. Sadly, she returned to St. Francis and told him about the feathers. He said to her, “You wish to repent and be forgiven of your sin. Good. But the damage of your words is done and can not be taken back.”

Indeed, I think we all know the truth of the old adage, “a sent arrow, a word unkindly spoken, and a missed opportunity cannot be retrieved.” Sometimes, it seems that we can say a thousand good things, smart things, insightful things and one dumb, hurtful or hateful thing and it’s the one that people will remember and repeat. That’s the power of the tongue! Also in the news this week has been the story of Nancy Grace, the CNN talk-show host, whose hectoring, combative questioning of Melinda Duckett, whose child had been reported kidnapped, apparently caused Duckett to kill herself. Now, I don’t know anything about Nancy Grace, what kind of journalist she is, what kind of person she is, but I know her now for her shockingly callous response to this tragedy. She could spend hours working as a volunteer with the poor or the sick and all millions of people will remember her for is being “the reporter who hounded that poor woman to death.”

I read something interesting in a commentary by John Jewell this week. I’ve not had time to verify the science to which he refers but I’m intrigued enough to repeat it now with that caveat and a promise to research more later and let you know what I find out. Jewell points out that the sound of words enters our ears and is translated into electrical charges which stimulate the brain and then the system that controls our hormones and our emotions. “Our whole physical system reacts,” he says, “when we hear words of care or condemnation. When we hear words that bring us pain or anxiety, the physical-chemical reaction takes 72 hours to subside.” Our words have a

special impact on those to whom we are close. They trust us more, expect hurt from us less, and are more vulnerable to us, if for no other reason than that we know best how to “push their buttons.” There’s a lot of truth to that old Mills Brothers song, “You Always Hurt the One You Love.” Maybe that’s why James wrote this about the tongue. Does anyone remember Mark’s account of what Jesus’ family said about him early in his ministry? “When his family heard about (his activities), they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” As he came to understand the truth of his brother’s life, James must have looked back on that incident with shame for what he had said. Sometimes, we don’t always think through the impact of our words. We must be careful with what we say, says Jewell, because “most people are far more sensitive than we know and when we’re honest, most of us are more sensitive than we dare to admit.”

“No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” What happens when we curse or speak ill of a fellow human, made in the likeness of God? Aren’t we really speaking ill of God? If we say, “this one that God made in God’s own image is worthless,” then God is devalued. Jesus came with good news for all, especially those whom society curses or holds at no value. When we put others down, are we following in the merciful and affirming way of Jesus?

The tongue can indeed be a world of iniquity. But James alludes to good trees bearing good fruit as did Jesus before him. If we are good trees, we can and should bear good fruit. Once again, we can turn to Paul to balance and amplify James’ teachings, just as James often balances Paul. To the Ephesians, in verses just before some that we studied last month, Paul wrote, “be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To the Colossians, he wrote, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” This is how we ought to employ our tongues and indeed we have, this morning in worship and in much of our daily lives.

It is important to remember, always, that as the Body of Christ, we, the Church, are called to take up the mission of Christ here on Earth and that mission has a lot to do with the tongue. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Now we are the ones, anointed by the Holy Spirit to bring good news, to proclaim release, recovery, freedom and the Lord’s favor. Just before he ascended, Jesus had this word for his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” It is true, as Francis of Assisi taught, that the Good News can be spread in many ways besides with the tongue. But sometimes it is necessary to speak.

James called the tongue “a fire... (that) sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.” As we know from examples this morning and from our own lives, that can certainly be

true. But our Scriptures teach us about some other tongues of fire as well. That is how Luke describes the gift of the Holy Spirit that came to the disciples at Pentecost, that same Holy Spirit that empowers every believer in Christ Jesus. An evil tongue can set the world on fire with destructive force, but the Good News can set the world on fire with hope and love. The fires that brave men and women battle in the eastern part of our state and other places where the summer has dried grass and trees into tinder have mostly ignited from just a spark. But the spark of God's love can set something ablaze in us and through our lives and our redeemed tongues in the whole world that can bring peace and fulfillment and joy as all humankind are invited to join in the Beloved Community of God. Thanks be to God!