

James 3:1-12 (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 19—Series B)**“Oh, That Tongue of Yours!”****Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT****September 12, 2021**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Epistle lesson recorded in James 3:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Benjamin Franklin, under the pseudonym “Poor Richard,” published “Poor Richard’s Almanac” from 1732-1758. It included a number of proverbial and pithy sayings, versions of which have found their way into our culture. “There are no gains without pains.” Or, “Eat to live, and not live to eat.” Then there are sayings like these that capture a sense of the obvious: “He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.” “If your head is wax, don’t walk in the sun.” And a saying presenting the wisdom of the age: “There are three faithful friends—an old wife, an old dog, and ready money.”

Now if Dr. Franklin were going to suggest a one-liner for James 3, no doubt that he would use this one: “Little strokes fell great oaks.” It takes a lot of little ax swings to chop the tree down! Yet the little swings lead to big results. Swings of the ax fells the mighty oak tree. A small bit in the mouth of a horse enables the rider to control the whole animal’s body. Large ships driven by wind-filled sails are guided by rudders that are much smaller than the vessel itself. Little things lead to big

results. It only takes a small part of the body to ruin the whole thing, the entire course of life set ablaze by that tongue of yours.

On my father's desk in his office was an engraved sign that read, "A closed mouth gathers no feet." If you are not yapping away, your tongue flapping away, you're not going to stick your foot in your mouth. Sadly, most of us don't live by that saying. Most of us don't know when to keep our mouths shut. We don't know when to keep our tongues from flapping away, saying things we ought not be saying and talking about things we ought not be talking about. James, proclaiming what God has to say about our tongue and our speech, reminds us that we can tame all kinds of animals and critters, but we cannot tame our tongue. The Lord, through James, calls our tongue "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." Whoever came up with the cliché, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," was a complete fool. You and I hurt other people, even ourselves, more with our words than with anything else. Think about it. How many times have you physically injured someone by punching them or beating them or throwing something at them? Contrast that to how many times you have said something that has hurt another, insulted another, grieved another.

Words hurt. Our little tongues that form our speech don't know when to shut up and so cause a whole world of unrighteousness and hurt and pain and sorrow and guilt. How do you speak to your spouse and children? Family, friends, and coworkers? With your words you can cut them deeply. You can bully others by what you say, text, or post online. You can abuse others by your words of hate, your demeaning speech, and your thoughtless put-downs. Your words can destroy friendships and relationships. Your words can break apart marriage and family. With our mouths, on Sundays especially, we bless our Lord and Father, and when we leave here, we curse people who are made in the image of God. We injure them with what we say. "My brothers and sisters, these things out not to be so." Repent and confess your sin to the Lord and to those you have hurt with your words. Receive forgiveness from the Savior and from one another and go, be at peace with one another.

Words hurt. So-and-so isn't around. So you talk about that person negatively, putting the blame on them for something they had absolutely nothing to do with. You have now hurt their reputation. And should they hear of what you said, how do you think they will feel about (a) themselves, and (b) about you? What a fire of hurt and anger your tongue has caused. "My brothers and sisters, these things ought not be so." Gossip has no place within the church and certainly no place in this congregation. Repent and confess your sin to the Lord and to those you have hurt with your words. Receive forgiveness from the Savior and from one another and go, be at peace with one another.

And what kind language comes out of your mouth? Is it language becoming a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ? Or is it the language of the world, the words of unrighteousness—cursing, swearing, and profanity. One day during World War II a detachment of American soldiers on Guadalcanal was startled to read the following announcement posted at the entrance to their mess hall: "American soldiers are requested please to be a little bit more careful in their choice of language, especially when natives are assisting them in unloading ships and trucks and in erecting abodes. American missionaries spent many years among us and taught us the use of clean speech. Every day, however, American soldiers use bad words, and the good work your missionaries did in our midst is being undermined by your careless profanity." To the greater shame of the Americans this notice was signed by a Polynesian chief! We must be careful of the language we use as Christians. Why do we insist on using language and words that are unbecoming of Christ and that give a poor witness to Him and to our faith? Now is a time for self-examination as you hear the Word of the Lord. Ask yourself, is His Word evident in my daily speech and conduct, or do I curse, speak carelessly, or misuse God's name? Repent of your sins against the Second Commandment and receive the forgiveness of Christ spoken to you in His Word of Absolution.

How ironic it is that, though we so often use words to hurt and to harm, God uses words to heal and to bless. Jesus Christ is the only person ever who always used His tongue without sin. Jesus, the God-Man, never spoke evil against another. He never hurt or harmed with His words to belittle folks or to ruin their reputation. He kept the Second Commandment perfectly just as He did all of God's Commandments. To the adulteress woman at the well with a reputation the whole town of Sychar knew about, Jesus said to her, "I will give you living water." To another woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." To those who crucified Him, those who railed against Him and cursed Him and spit upon Him, He also spoke absolution: "Father, forgive them." To a thief on the cross who had previously mocked Him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Words heal.

Jesus takes our sinful and sin-filled words and forgives them. His perfect words spoken in love are credited to us as our perfect words. His death on the cross is full and sufficient payment for our sins of thought, deed, **and words**. And it is with that very Word of forgiveness that Christ sends us to one another and to the world. From John 20, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'" (21-22). To those who hurt us and wrong us with evil words, we stand ready in the power of the Holy Spirit to forgive in the name of Jesus Christ all who repent of their sins against us. Words heal. After all, isn't that what the Lord Jesus does for you every time you sin against Him with your words, actions, thoughts, and desires? Of course. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). And so, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we "forgive those who trespass against us," even as we pray in the Lord's Prayer.

Oh, that tongue of yours! May it always abound in words of love and peace, mercy and grace. When you sin with your tongue, confess your sin to the Lord. Confess your sin to the person or persons whom you have hurt and offended and injured. Receive the absolution of Christ and the forgiveness of your brother or sister in the Savior. And when one who has spoken evil of you or hurt you with their words comes and seeks peace and forgiveness, grant it to them. Say the words, "I forgive you in Jesus' name." Then go in peace and be reconciled in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.