

Sticks, and Stones, and Words

James 3: 1-12

September 23, 2018 (Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost)

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Researchers have found that the average person says about 16,000 words per day. That is enough words to fill 100 pages of a typical paperback book.

Think about the words you have spoken so far today.

Did you say good morning to someone? Have you been on the phone yet today? What did you chat about in the car ride here?

Have you had any arguments?

Who did you see when you first got here this morning? What did you say to them? Who did you talk with during the passing of the peace?

If you stop to think back, you will realized just how quickly those words pile up.

16,000 every day.

The Epistle of James, which we read from this morning, is just under 2,000 words long. This text is a collection of admonitions to the early church, the kind of document you would use to help instruct people in how to live in the world as a Christian.

In that way, it is actually quite similar to a sermon, and about as long as one of mine.

The text contains seven sections of teaching covering the following topics.

Temptations, hearing and doing, partiality, faith and works, words, contentiousness, worldly minded-merchants and the wealthy, and then a final section that covers a grab bag of various themes.

Today's reading is the teaching about words. This passage is sometimes referred to as "the taming of the tongue."

Scripture compares our tongues to the rudders of great ships. Although they are among the smallest parts of us, they are immensely important to steering us one way or the other.

Scripture compares our words to a spark, that can set a whole forest ablaze.

Like a spring, that can pour forth either fresh, or salty water.

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Perhaps you have heard the old playground taunt. Stick and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Its catchy. But it isn't quite true is it?

Most of us can recall a time when we have been hurt by words.

And most of us are probably ashamed to remember the ways our words have hurt others.

Words may not leave physical scars, but they can leave emotional and spiritual wounds that last a life time. They can feel just as bad as a punch to the stomach. They can trip people into despair.

Our words are among the most powerful things we possess. We ought to take great care in how we use them.

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Earlier this week I saw a video online recorded in a grocery store checkout line. A video that is like so, so, many others I have seen in the past few years.

Two hispanic women were checking out their groceries.

And a white woman, who was in line behind them, was screaming at them the whole time.

She told them to go back to their country.

She told them to speak English.

The two woman, trying to buy their food and go home, chose to ignore her, but they looked terrified, they looked like they wished they could just vanish.

She turned to others and said “you know we paid for those groceries right, that’s our tax dollars paying for their food stamps.”

She called them lazy. She called them dirty.

Scripture calls the tongue “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Those words hurt. They do real damage to psyches and spirits.

And in fact when people speak in that way to others in our country, it does damage to the soul of our nation.

I mentioned earlier that today's reading often appears under a title. The Taming of the Tongue.

And I surely wish that woman in the grocery line could have tamed hers.

But I am not sure that title captures the fullness of what scripture is trying to teach us here.

How many of us were raised to have tame tongues. How many of us were, explicitly, or implicitly, taught to keep quiet, to keep to ourselves, to mind our own business, to stay out of the way?

Because there was something even more horrifying in that video than the venom spewing from that one woman's mouth.

It was the cashier who kept his eyes on the scanner and didn't look up once.

It was the crowd of outer customers who stopped to see what the disturbance was about, but didn't say a word in defense of the people who were being attacked.

That woman seemed so proud of her prejudice. So assured.

And you know what, she had every reason to feel that way, because not one person challenged a word she said. People just watched it happen.

And get it. It was a scary scene. And we can be stunned and frozen when all we expected was to pick up some milk and eggs and suddenly we are faced with the demands of a moment like this.

But there were far too many tame tongues in that grocery store.

The Bible is not teaching us to tame our tongues.

It is reminding us that our words have immense power. Power like the rudder has over a great ship. The ability to spark something much bigger.

Instead of taming the tongue? How about harnessing the tongue?

What kind of spirit might have swept through that crowd if one person said, “those are our neighbors, do not talk to them like that.”

Or how might the energy of that scene be steered in a new way, if someone walked up to those two women and said, “I am sorry about her, can I help you carry your groceries to the car, come on, let’s go.”

Moments like these do not call for tame tongues.

They call for courageous and faithful hearts, that know how to harness the power of their words change the moment.

If you ever find yourself in a situation like this. And you cannot think of what to do. One easy thing you can do is simply walk up to the person who under

attack and offer to walk away with them. Or, if you are on a subway car and cannot walk away, just start talking to them about anything else, what kind of music do they like? where did they get those shoes? Join them in ignoring the aggressor.

I know that it is the most tempting thing in the world to tame our tongues, to pretend we didn't hear, or to shuffle away. But, unless you are in real danger, that is not an option for us.

The lips that we use to praise God cannot be silent in moments like that, if they are, they betray our lack of faith.

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Words are powerful things.

In the beginning God created by speaking.

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, God's own Word walking with us.

Our words can wound.

Our words can heal.

Our words can offer despair or hope.

Our words can offer solidarity and love.

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You might think that the brokenness of the world is insurmountable.

But look at ships, they are large, and yet they are guided by a very small rudder.

You might think that if you stand up for something, or someone, you will be standing alone, but How great a forest can be set ablaze even by small fire.

We use our words to praise and bless God.

Can blessing and curing come from the same mouth?

Can the same spring pour forth salty and fresh water?

No.

Our words are the most powerful things that we have.

How will you use yours?