

On the power of the tongue

1 Kings 17:8–16

Psalm 146

James 3:1-18

Mark 12:38–44

Text: James 3:5-6, 8

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. . . . but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Introduction

The website ‘Working Preacher’ provides commentary by currently active professors/theologians on the passages of scripture that are appointed for Sunday worship in the Revised Common Lectionary. In her introductory remarks on this text from the Apostle James on the untameable tongue, New Testament professor Sandra Hack Polaski writes, “The preacher encountering this text might be forgiven for the sudden urge to suggest, in lieu of the sermon, that the congregation engage in a time of silent prayer.” It is one of those texts of scripture where the preacher, upon reading it, feels ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t. No preacher wants to have too much to say about this text; I am tempted to announce, ‘we will let the Apostle James speak for himself and just re-read the text for our message today.’

1. If the Apostle James were writing this admonition today, in the midst of our social media world, instead of writing “but no one can tame the tongue” it has been suggested that he would write, “but no one can tame the thumb—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” I marvel at the hateful things people will write about one another and write to one another on social media; things they would never say face to face. In a society that seems only to be shouting at one another and not listening to each other this word from the Apostle needs to be heard today.

Whether the ‘tongue’ or the ‘thumb’ we are talking about speech. For the Apostle James, the tongue is a metaphor for our speech. And speech is serious business. We may bristle at the Apostle’s assertion that ‘no one can tame the tongue.’ We know the importance of not saying out loud everything that comes to our mind; but why does the stuff we know not to say come to our minds? And, if the tongue is tameable, why do we find that we need to write laws governing what we call hate-speech? Think of the people in recent times who have lost careers in broadcasting for saying something or using words considered to be out-of-bounds and inconsistent with current societal pieties. It seems we humans know that speech is important business.

We read the Apostle James with our assumptions about the importance of the spoken word. James has a thoroughly Hebrew understanding that he assumes as he writes to a church that largely shares these same assumptions.

It is plain that a word, once uttered, is not merely a grammatical unit. The spoken word is an event. And in fact the Hebrew language honours this truth, for the Hebrew word DABAR means both “word” and “event”. Our Hebrew foreparents knew that the chief characteristic of God is

that he speaks. They knew too that when God speaks something happens. It is not the case that God speaks, and then silence swallows up his word as though it had never been uttered, with the result that nothing significant has occurred. God speaks, we are told, and the universe with its inexhaustible complexity is fashioned out of nothing. God speaks, and the prophets themselves are “voice-activated”. Elijah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah; these men are prophets whose entire existence is “voice-activated” by the Holy One of Israel. Amos acquaints us with the irrefutable ground of his vocation: “The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?”

Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, utters that Word which he himself is, and Lazarus is quickened from the dead. (We might as well add that the same thing happens every time the gospel is preached.) Jesus sends out his disciples to many different towns. They are to preach in his name. If their word (his word) is not heeded in this or that town, says the master, “it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town”. In short, to disdain and dismiss those words which attest Jesus Christ and his kingdom is to guarantee one’s non-survival in the coming judgement. DABAR: the word is an event.

It is difficult for us, with our modern assumptions, to grasp this because we think that speech and act are entirely distinct. Speaking is speaking and acting is acting. We have to work at thinking our way back into a Hebrew understanding where speaking and doing are one.

If we think about this for a moment it’s obvious. One purpose of speech is to disseminate information. If I am told that Paris is the capital city of France or Lake Superior is the coldest of the Great Lakes or the sun is ninety-two million miles from the earth, then more than speech has occurred: ignorance has been dispelled. That’s the event in this case: ignorance has been dispelled, and the foundation for greater learning has been put in place. More profoundly, another purpose of speech isn’t merely to disseminate information but also to be that vehicle which conveys us ourselves in our self-giving to another person. The words, “I love you”, don’t merely disseminate information; they are the vehicle which conveys the speaker herself in her self-giving to another person. Word and act are one. The Apostle James’ seemingly-to-us strident discussion of our speech arises from this understanding of the power of the tongue.

2. As James takes up this topic of the spoken word it seems prompted by the number of people aspiring to be teachers in the church. Keep in mind that this early church James addresses are largely Jewish Christians who have been dispersed around the Mediterranean world, in many cases by persecution. The Rabbi (teacher) was an esteemed person in their cultural mindset. James addresses people wishing to put themselves forward as teachers motivated by the status and other rewards of the position. This process could and did lead to rivalries and divisions as teachers tried to secure a following. Not so, says James, for not many should be teachers. What is more, such a role means not simply honor and a following, but responsibility, for “to whom much is given much is required.”

It is good for preachers to routinely visit the Apostle James and be reminded of the power of the spoken word and the greater strictness with respect to judgement. Being a pastor/minister is a great privilege and we pastors need to keep in mind the responsibility of the office. Congregations accord their minister an authority and honour that must be taken seriously and treated with care. It is easy to become enamoured with the sound of one’s own voice. I recall

fondly the sage advice of a seminary professor who said to a classroom full of aspiring preachers, “Always keep in mind that no matter how many come to hear you preach on a Sunday morning, people are still staying away by the thousands.”

When James says that teachers ‘will be judged with greater strictness,’ whose judgement is he speaking about? It is common among us that we expect leaders to practise what they preach. We expect the physician who gives us health advice to follow that same advice herself. Thus stricter judgement does come through these common expectations. In Jesus’ parable of the faithful and unfaithful slave he said, ‘From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.’ In hearing these things I want to be sure that we are not frightened from serving our Lord. Jesus is faithful and able to enact in us what he calls from us. If you sense a call to pastoral ministry or sense that you should say ‘yes’ to leading a study or other ministry know that our Lord’s word to us is ‘fear not.’ This word from the Apostle James is spoken as a corrective so that we engage to serve our Saviour and not ourselves.

3. “And the tongue is a fire,” writes James, “The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ... but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Is it really this bad? We wonder if James may be overstating things a little to make a point.

Do you ever wonder why we can reserve our worst behaviours for the people we say we love the most? Things we would never dream of saying to the person checking us out at the grocery store we feel quite at liberty to say to members of our household. Where does that come from?

You know that children’s rhyme, ‘sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me;’ a rhyme spoken as a defense against name-calling and verbal bullying. We know it isn’t true that ‘words will never hurt me.’ Words do hurt and do cause harm. Think about how an argument can turn into a fight. And how fights can escalate even into war. Where does that come from?

Think about sarcasm. Sarcasm is contemptuous, biting speech whose aim is the opposite of what the words mean. The baseball player strikes out with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth inning. As he stumbles back to the dugout, head down, a fan shouts, “Well done, all-star!” The words mean that the batter is a superior player who has just performed outstandingly. What the fan intends to say, however, is the exact opposite, and it is all said with deliberate intent to wound. Psychiatrists will tell you that sarcasm destroys children. They are confused—the words spoken sound positive yet the child can see in the expression and tone the opposite is meant. Why do we do this to one another?

In our era when microphones seem to be everywhere near celebrities and political figures things spoken are heard; some things they later wish they didn’t utter. We have all been in that place when we wish we could shove the words just spoken back into our mouths. I note that when celebrities or political figures endeavour to mitigate the damage of what was said they say, “I misspoke.” I also hear, when what was said was particularly egregious, an apology offered along with the claim, ‘that is not really me,’ or ‘that is not who I am.’

James addresses this problem. With the same tongue we bless the Lord and curse those made in the likeness of God. And then James points to nature noting that salt water cannot yield fresh. You produce what is in your nature. Jesus once noted, from nature as well, that “each tree is known by its fruit, ... “for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45) We may not like what we said but it did bubble from our hearts. Jesus also said, “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: avarice, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander,” just to name a few our Lord mentioned that are often revealed in speech.

The gospel asserts that we have a heart problem. It is corrupted, turned in on itself away from God. The bible calls this condition sin. And we cannot will ourselves free from it no matter how much we discipline our speech. We need saving. The salvation that our Lord gave his life to give us frees us from captivity to sin. Power to overcome is found in Him. As Jesus forges the reality of his saving grace in our lives he empowers us to live the life he calls from us. Our speech included.

We pray each week, ‘thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ What is speech like in heaven? We also pray, ‘thy kingdom come.’ We pray for the kingdom our Lord inaugurated at his death and resurrection to come to fruition. What is speech like in the kingdom of our Lord, the everlasting kingdom of love and light? We have noted that our Lord’s kingdom, that future that is the believer’s now, is a kingdom where love reigns, where love gives way only to more love. It is a place where speech is directed in perfect harmony with the love that Jesus Christ is. Not only will all speech bless but will emerge from hearts cleansed entirely of sin so we will always say the right thing.

For the church on earth there is a now and not yet with relationship to our Lord’s kingdom. The kingdom of our Lord overlaps with the kingdoms of this world and the believer has a foot in both worlds. But our weight is not evenly distributed. The believer shifts her weight to the kingdom of our Lord. So when James tells us that blessing and cursing should not be from the same mouth he is indicating that our weight needs to be shifted to kingdom where speech is blessing. James’ discussion about the wisdom from above that should guide our life is pointing us to live in the kingdom we pray to come. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

In our fall bible study we have been following a video series on the book of James by a pastor named Francis Chan. The prayer he offered at the end of his talk on the wisdom our Lord gives us for navigating life, summarizes well the believer’s posture in all of this.

Lord, give me the wisdom I need to navigate through this life in a way that honors you.