

**"Taming the Tongue"**  
**Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide**  
**Lectionary Year B**  
**September 13, 2009**  
**Text: James 3:1-12**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

All of us have heard the expression, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me." Well that's just not true. *Words are powerful weapons, and they can cause great pain and suffering.* My deepest emotional scars, those I carry to this day, came about as a direct result of things either said to me or about me. Some of those words were spoken by family members some by church members, but in both cases they were spoken by those in whom I had placed my deepest trust and of whom I had not expected such insensitivity at best and cruelty at worst. That means that most of the hurtful words I have had directed at me have come from people who consider themselves Christians. It is most unfortunate that we encounter even in the church what James calls "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" or what we might simply refer to as "tongue toxin" [Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 65].

This is the concern of James as he writes this letter to his congregations. As you heard the passage read a moment ago, he begins with a sort of "good news/bad news" statement with regard to

preachers and teachers in particular. The good news is that those of us who assume that role are not expected to be perfect. We make mistakes just like anyone else. The bad news is that we are held to a higher standard. I suppose that means that while we may mess up from time to time in what we say, we really ought to know better, and we really shouldn't expect to be cut an inordinate amount of slack. I think that is fair. Preachers and teachers need to set an example of avoiding tongue toxin.

James primarily is concerned about hypocrisy, of no small problem in the church then and now. We understand that it is hypocrisy when our speech and our actions are not in sync. When we say one thing and do another, that is hypocrisy. We're pretty clear on that. But it also is hypocrisy when our speech and our speech are not in sync, and this is the specific problem James is addressing in this passage. If we bless our Creator God and then curse by what we are saying our brother or sister created in the image of God, we not only are saying something unfavorable about another person, we also are saying something untrue about God, namely, that God makes junk. We are professing a theology of creation opposed to the testimony that "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" [Hinkle, *Christian Century*, September 6, 2003, p. 18].

James uses no less than seven different illustrations to make the point that the tongue, though a relatively small anatomical feature, can do monumental damage when not kept under control. It can be severely toxic indeed. If we were giving modern examples, we might include the massive power unleashed in germ warfare or nuclear fission [Taylor, p. 65], yet it is interesting that James' ancient metaphors certainly stand the test of time. All we have to do is think of the wildfires that have been burning in California recently to understand that a "great forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" James certainly would not be surprised that so many of our laws today are against words—slander, libel, contempt, perjury [Carl R. Holladay, p. 410].

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, James does not give us a simplistic remedy for tongue toxin. It would be nice if he offered us a quick and easy antidote, but he doesn't. He makes it clear that "no one can tame the tongue." But that certainly doesn't mean that we should throw up our hands and quit trying all together. We at least must make an honest effort to turn our curses into blessings, our words of death into words of life, the things we say that can kill into things we say that can heal. How do we do that? I would like to make a couple of modest proposals of how we might begin to tame the tongue.

If we are going to tame the tongue, **we are going to need to monitor the quantity of our words.** One commentator on this

passage makes the observation that "we speak too many words not to blunder occasionally" [*Ibid.*]. I would turn his statement around and suggest that we blunder occasionally at least in part because we speak too many words. *The place to start when it comes to taming the tongue is to talk less.* The fact is that the more words we put out there, the greater the chances are that some of them will be stupid at best and harmful at worst.

In the Old Testament, God reminds us that he is not like us, and at least a part of what it means for him to not be like us is that he doesn't have to act on all his feelings. If we want to be more godly, we shouldn't either. In like manner, if we want to bring our tongues under control, we should keep in mind that we don't have to say everything we think or feel. Earlier in this letter, James suggests that it would be a good idea if we were quick to listen but slow to speak (1:19). In other words, we can just keep our mouths shut and save ourselves a world of embarrassment and others a world of pain. It's hard to put your foot in your mouth when your mouth is not open.

In the classic Paul Newman movie, *Cool Hand Luke*, the title character gets his name when he wins a card game in prison by bluffing. When asked why he was willing to bet on the cards he had, his response is that sometimes "nothing is a real cool hand." Sometimes the most appropriate thing, the best thing, the coolest thing to say is nothing.

Silence is not near as deadly as a thoughtless or insensitive word. There is a reason why we say that "silence is golden." It often can be of utmost value. Words need to be used carefully, with extreme caution. My dad used to tell me on more than one occasion when I was growing up, "Son, you need to engage your brain before you start your mouth." Truer words were never spoken not just to me, but to all of us. If we are going to stand a chance of taming the tongue, we need to start by monitoring the quantity of the words we speak.

If we are going to tame the tongue, **we also are going to need to monitor the quality of our words.** As I have suggested earlier, James maintains in this passage that words fall into two broad categories: blessings and curses or what we might call words of life and words of death. What we say to others can be killing or healing. So I would put forth the idea that *we need to do whatever we can to avoid spreading tongue toxin, but instead, do whatever we can to offer "tongue tonic."* You know what a tonic is. It is something that invigorates, restores, refreshes, or stimulates. It is good for what ails you. You just feel better all over when a tonic has been administered. And what we say to each other in the church and beyond needs to work like a tonic. Christians need to be characterized by tongue tonic, not tongue toxin.

We know all too well the nature of words that kill, that do harm to one another. They are words spoken that condemn, demean, abuse, intimidate [Holladay, p. 410]. They are words spoken that are mean-spirited, judgmental, rejecting, cruel, condescending. When we are engaged in name-calling and stereotyping and profiling, we often are using harmful words that can be deadly. When we speak the hurtful truth, it may be toxic. When we make jokes at others' expense, we may be guilty of tongue toxin. Certainly the spreading of lies is toxic, but so can be seemingly harmless gossip, toxin in its most innocently packaged form, perfumed poison, as it were, but deadly all the same.

All of these are examples of tongue toxin. They are words that kill, words of death, words that curse. What about words that heal, words of life, words that bless? What are examples of words that act as tongue tonic? I would suggest that they are lovingly truthful words, where we speak the truth in love as the Apostle Paul suggests. They are inclusive words that are inviting, accepting, affirming, embracing, encouraging, and empowering. They are words that compliment, words that are designed to build a person up rather than tear a person down. They are nurturing words that make a person feel better about himself or herself and help that person become who God intends.

I am a realist, and a major part of being a realist means that I tend to live in the land of the way things *are* instead of in the land of

the way things ought to be. My wife, God bless her, is an idealist. Why she is married to me, I cannot fathom except by the grace of God. As an idealist, she tends to live in the land of the way things ought to be instead of in the land of the way things are. So she stays more frustrated than I do. She gets angrier than I get. Her sense of what is fair and just cries out to be satisfied much more than mine does. She shakes her fist and says, "It ought not to be that way!" I say, "It is what it is." She sulks; I just smile, but it is a sad smile because I know she is right.

Stephanie and James have a lot in common, much more so than the epistle writer and I do. Notice what he says in the last half of verse 10: "My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." What ought not to be so? *What ought not to be so is the way we bless God and then curse our fellow church member and family member and staff member and community member.* As I said earlier, that is no less or other than hypocrisy, perhaps the worst form of hypocrisy. We ought not to speak that way about our fellow human beings who are created in the image of God.

I don't know of a time in my life when these words from James are more relevant than they are now. There is an incredible amount of hate-speech going on in our country, and it is most unfortunate. Words are bandied about in an ugly way and are meant to cause as much

damage as possible to those at whom they are aimed. There is no shortage of tongue toxin on talk radio, on the internet, in the blogs, and on cable news. There is a proverbial war of words going on twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. It seems that in our country we are living in a verbal battle zone.

And that means it is all the more important that the church offers an alternative. The church needs to be engaged in the dialogue of our culture in a way that refrains from toxicity. I would suggest that we simply must offer the alternative of a valuable and meaningful way of talking to one another, with a tone quite a bit more civil and pleasant than is offered by other voices. We can bring to the national discussion the gift of tongue tonic rather than tongue toxin by monitoring both the quantity and the quality of the words we speak. As the church, we can make a healthy and helpful contribution to the debate over major issues in our country by choosing our words carefully so that we wind up offering words that heal, words of life, words that bless. If we do so, I believe we will be what our world needs most at this time or any other: the church at its best.