

Pastor's Message – 9/15/24  
James 3:1-12

You may remember that we started a worship series on the Epistle of James 2 weeks ago, and we will be in James for five-weeks of Sundays. In today's passage, we find a short lesson on the incredible power of speech. This week's reading from James includes a number of images: a horse with a bit, a large ship piloted by a small rudder, and the tongue setting a forest ablaze, staining the whole body, set on fire by hell itself. In spite of those themes, or maybe because of them, James often seems to generate a lot of discussion among Christians.

James points out that it's the bridle that guides the horse. It's the rudder that guides the ship. It's the tongue that guides the body. It's the spark that starts the fire. Such small things have a huge influence. Even a small rudder can change the course of a big ship of love - it can move toward God or away from God – but the shift can be very subtle because it is a very small rudder.

Have you ever ridden on one of those 2-seater paddle boats? I have, but the one I paddled was not a very seaworthy paddle boat. First of all, it leaked, and water filled the bottom of the boat which made paddling from one point to another very difficult. The waves and the wind took us off-course easily, and even the most minute change in the position of the rudder resulted in a wide sweeping course – not quite a straight line.

Sometimes even the smallest word can make a huge difference. I remember once in a previous appointment when a church member was explaining to me why she was late for church that day. It seems her wash machine hose had sprung a leak and she was battling a deluge in her laundry room. "That's quite a story you have to tell," I remember exclaiming. She, in turn, thought that I was disbelieving her and suggesting that I thought she was making it up which wasn't at all what I was trying to say. The tongue, by a simple word, can cause problems.

You're probably keeping some track of current political campaign for President and Senator and all the other races. Political campaigns can be prime examples of how words can be used truthfully, artfully or in ways that obfuscate or confuse. There may be some catch phrase that comes out of

political rhetoric that will enter the common vernacular. There may be words that hurt and destroy reputations.

Once leaving our lips, our words are out of our control. You can't get toothpaste back in the tube. The bell cannot be un-rung. The train has left the station. Our words may not "go viral," but they may "go virus," infecting more people than we'd care to know.

Like a bit in a horse's mouth, or the rudder of a ship, James teaches us that our tongues can lead us to places we do not want to go. Then he reminds us that the damage can be far more catastrophic. As a tiny fire can grow out of control and destroy everything around it, so, too, can a careless word wreak havoc upon relationships and reputations.

The story is told of a servant named Aesop who was asked to prepare a great banquet. The master ordered Aesop to find the best meat available for the banquet. After careful thought, Aesop went out and bought what he considered to be a prime cut of meat. After cooking it, he put the entrees on the table and covered each one with a lid. When the guests were seated, the master ordered the banquet to begin. Each guest removed the lid and to their amazement and horror, found a hearty portion of cooked tongue. The master was furious. He called Aesop aside and said, "You fool, I ordered you to get the best and you went and bought tongues." "But master, I got the best," Aesop replied. "Tongues have been responsible for some of the world's greatest sayings and most profound truths. That's why I bought tongues."

"Very well, Aesop, we are going to have another banquet, only this time I want you to buy the worst meat you can find!" Aesop thought a while, and then went out and bought some. You guessed it, more tongues. He cooked them and again placed them on the table and covered them with a lid. The guests arrived and were seated. The banquet began. When the master saw what had happened he was absolutely enraged. He ordered Aesop to explain at once. Aesop said, "Master, hear me out. You first wanted the best and I bought tongues, because tongues have uttered some of the world's greatest truths. Then you ordered me to find the worst. Again I bought tongues because tongues have uttered some of the greatest lies!"

We started our worship series on the Epistle of James two Sundays and I titled my Message, "Coach James." Coach James hits home today, right where we live, think, and speak. The first verse of chapter 3, which I initially skipped, but then realized is important and germane to the chapter, reads "not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly." Well, friends, like it or not, we are all teachers to our children and grandchildren and all the children who watch and learn from us.

They see and hear what's important to us in our actions and our words. What we do and say influences them. What we say is important to us becomes what is important to them. The things that we do that are our priorities become their priorities too. If we put say, the Green Bay Packers ahead of church, they learn that football is more important than church. If we put fishing or hunting or any sporting event before our worship of God, they learn that relationship to God is less important than other things. Our words and actions matter.

There is an old saying that the pen is mightier than the sword, but the tongue also wields as much power as the sword! Sometimes more power! If we are going to respect the power of the tongue, we must:

Be proactive rather than reactive. People will forgive almost anything if you admit your mistakes, apologize, and ask for forgiveness.

Think before you speak or act.

Practice what you preach.

Remember, the church is not about you. Get yourself out of the way and focus on the love of God.

Take the high road.

Rely on a few trusted friends to be a reality check and hold you accountable.

Of course there are going to be times when every single one of us says or writes something that we just wish we hadn't, "for all of us make many mistakes" as James puts it (James 3:2). Thank goodness we serve a God of grace.

But at the same time, it never hurts to be reminded of the power of our own tongues. This small organ can do so much damage in so little time. We need to be aware of that power and use it, as James suggests, to guide not only the actions of our bodies, but to bless the people around us. What is that old saying? "You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar."

In other words, our tongues can be used to bless just as easily as they can be used to curse. Let us pray that the words that spring forth from our mouths are more often fresh water than brackish.

The heart of what we're aiming for is found in the first half of the comparisons Coach James offers in verses 9-12. We're called toward becoming a people who continually bless both God and our neighbors. What should emanate from us should be experienced as fresh water, refreshing and encouraging to others, not brackish water that causes others to feel ill. And there should be a clear integrity between who we claim to be (figs, grapevines) and what we produce.

When we come together on a Sunday morning to praise God, unite our voices in prayer and together confess our faith through creeds and affirmations, prayers and songs, we are using our tongues in service to God.

After worship, when we encourage one another over a cup of coffee in the gathering area, tell our story to someone in our small group who can learn from our mistakes, or pause to pray with a friend who is struggling, we are, in the words of James, sharing a blessing. But it doesn't stop there.

When we compliment the work of someone we work with, when we leave a note of appreciation for our waiter at the restaurant, when we compliment the youth in our church or neighborhood -- when we do this, we are living our calling.

"The tongue is a small flame of fire," says Coach James (v. 6). The question is whether it will burn down our communities and churches or whether the word of God's wisdom, speaking through us, will provide light and warmth for everyone. We began our worship by declaring "The heavens are telling the glory of the God." Just as are the heavens, so are we part of God's creation. "Let us join the heavens and [also] tell of God's glory" in what we say and what we do.