

SERMON: Taming the Tongue

TEXT: James 3:1-12

After my parents were divorced, my mom went back to college to get her teaching degree. She was in her 40's and had not been to school in twenty years, so it didn't come easy to her. I remember her struggling with math and a required foreign language class. She chose to take Portuguese, and it turned out to be harder than she expected.

While she was taking the class – and basically for the rest of her life – whenever she was upset about something and was in danger of losing her temper, she had a habit of counting to ten. Out loud. In Portuguese! I guess she felt like she should take advantage of any opportunity to practice the language. I always thought it was funny, but I also learned a little Portuguese along the way!

Of course, counting to ten is one of the suggested ways to calm down before you say something you'll regret. Sort of like biting your tongue, but a lot less painful.

Someone once said, "The best time for you to hold your tongue is the time you feel you must say something or bust." (Josh Billings, [www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com))

I'm sure you've heard that humorous, little prayer: "Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth." We laugh because we know it's true – we need to have better control over what we say – and yet, it's unfortunate that the prayer is usually not sincere; we use it only to get a laugh.

William Shakespeare wrote, "Give thy thoughts no tongue."

[www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com)

And the letter of James offers some vivid metaphors to describe the power of the tongue. Like bits in the mouths of horses to make them obey or like a rudder on a large ship, or like a small fire that sets a forest ablaze – the tongue is such a small member of the body but its power is great. James goes on to explain: "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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

We all understand the power of the tongue. We have all felt the pain of this untamed, evil force. It is not easily forgotten. I mentioned a few sermons ago that I've seen statistics about child development, indicating that it takes ten positive messages to equal the weight of one negative message. I suspect this is true for adults as well. I'm certain I don't remember all of the good things that people have said to me throughout my life, but I definitely remember some of the bad things – word for word.

Encouraging words can make a bad day good. Inspiring words can provide the spark that lights the fire of our passion for life and purpose. Destructive, hateful words can humiliate us and rob every ounce of self-esteem we have.

It is these destructive words that seem to be the most common in our society today; the rule rather than the exception. Our words – both written and spoken – are powerful weapons that we hurl at one another without a thought. Without counting to ten. Without TAMING THE TONGUE.

You may have read Tyler Tankersley's column in the newspaper yesterday. He must be following the lectionary, as he comments on this same passage from James.

“Our words matter. The ethics of our speech cannot be separated from the content of our faith. Paul writes to the early Christians: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need so that your words give grace to those who hear." (Ephesians 4:29) And for 21st century followers of Jesus, Paul and James could have easily been writing about the words we choose to use or share on social media.” (Tyler Tankersley, Word to the Wise, September 15, 2018, Southeast Missourian)

Tankersley also bemoans the fact that we have few leaders in our country today whose words match their actions. “They use their words to belittle others and to craft their own fake narratives about the world.” (Tyler Tankersley, Word to the Wise, September 15, 2018, Southeast Missourian)

Another theologian makes a similar point, writing, “As we move ever further into the information age, we also move ever further into the disinformation age. Error, miscommunication, deception, slander, and libel have become so common that we expect them from reputable sources and all but insist on them from sources we think of as disreputable. Always powerful, language now reaches farther faster. James’s warning ought to be ever before us. (Mark Douglas, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, copyright 2009, Westminster John Knox Press)

I particularly appreciated my friend Tyler's acronym, T.H.I.N.K, which provides a reminder of five questions to ask ourselves before we speak or post or press *send*: "Is it **T**True? Is it **H**Helpful? Is it **I**Inspiring? Is it **N**Necessary? Is it **K**Kind?"

(Tyler Tankersley, Word to the Wise, September 15, 2018, Southeast Missourian) It seems like a very productive way to spend ten seconds, rather than simply counting, as my mother did. Still, this formula is certainly easier said than done.

We do speak before we think, all too often. Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples – the rock on which the church was built – was mouthy (if you will) and impulsive, as well. When he saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain with the ghosts of Moses and Elijah, Peter was quick to offer to make dwellings for each of them. When he saw Jesus walking on the water, he jumped in the water, too. And when he was in the courtyard just outside where Jesus was being tried and sentenced to death, Peter denied knowing him.

True to form, in the passage we read from the gospel of Mark, Peter spoke without thinking when he rebuked Jesus for talking about events to come that would ultimately lead to his death. While he understood Jesus to be the promised

Messiah, he failed to understand the nature of that role. Jesus was preparing his disciples for the suffering and rejection in store for him, while Peter envisioned success and authority and power. Peter didn't want to hear anything about suffering, and he in essence told Jesus to stop speaking about it. In response, Jesus spoke more harshly than we've ever heard him speak: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

With such biting words, you might want to suggest that Jesus was guilty of failing to tame his own tongue. However, when Peter rebuked Jesus, I believe he essentially committed the same error as the early Christians to whom James wrote. With his tongue, he blessed Jesus by calling him Messiah, then cursed him by denying that the role is accomplished through suffering. "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing."

Peter wanted it to be easy. Don't we all? When he tried to stop Jesus from acknowledging the harsh truth of the path ahead, Jesus took it as an affront. "No, Peter. You can't sugarcoat this. Don't you dare pretend everything's going to be sunshine and roses. You and the others need to be aware of the storm that is coming. You need to know that the road is long and difficult. You need to know,

Peter that I will suffer physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. And if you deny that, then you deny me.”

Let me suggest that our untamed tongues are guilty of more than just cursing one another. Rather, the words we use as weapons curse the Son of God, our Lord and Savior, the one whom we profess to follow. We thwart the very mission and purpose of Jesus – to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves – when we speak with untamed tongues. We deny his life, death, and resurrection.

As we practice TAMING THE TONGUE, may we pause – perhaps count to ten – before we speak. May we think before we speak, “Is it **T**True? Is it **H**Helpful? Is it **I**Inspiring? Is it **N**Necessary? Is it **K**Kind?” May we honor Christ and advance his mission in the world. May we love the Lord our God, may we love our neighbors as ourselves with every word we speak and every deed we do, everywhere we go and with every person we meet... to the glory of God!

AMEN.