

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 50:4-9
SECOND LESSON: James 3:1-12
September 12, 2021

“Me and My Big Mouth”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A young couple invited their elderly pastor for Sunday dinner. When they were in the kitchen preparing the meal the minister asked the young son what they were having.

“Goat,” replied the little boy.

“Goat?” the minister asked. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yep,” said the little boy, “I heard my dad say to my mom, “We might as well have the old goat for dinner today as any other day.”

We’ve all had bad days when we’ve said things we regret. **Some of us have had bad days when our children have said things we regret!** But pain and fear can also make us short-tempered and intolerant. And if the damage our mouth has caused is not too great a sincere apology can repair things. But words are uniquely toxic. Words last. I may forget getting hit by a bully, but I will always remember what that bully said. Because our minds developed in such a way that the negative is always magnified all out of proportion to the positive, we remember words.

James recognizes the incredible power of words by comparing the size of the tongue with other parts of the body. It is a tiny part of us, yet very powerful. With words we can persuade, intimidate, or deceive. With words we can encourage, inspire or inform. Political discourse in our nation has become so bitter that words fly like weapons designed to cause maximum damage. Cable news would have us exist in a permanent state of high anxiety and rage, all through the use of words. Words have also convinced people that a safe and effective vaccine is dangerous, and a horse de-wormer is not! Words can do a lot of damage.

James uses three metaphors to describe the tongue, or the power of words, in this letter. In the first the tongue is compared to the bit in a horse’s mouth. It is a small piece of metal, and yet with it the rider can direct the horse which way to go. This is very straightforward. The direction of one person, or one life, is involved. Our words guide our path in life.

In his second metaphor James compares the tongue to the rudder of a ship. A rudder is a relatively small part of the ship, and yet the rudder sets the direction for the entire ship. But this time outside forces come into play. This time there is wind and waves, possibly even storms. And this time the entire crew is affected by the direction the rudder sets. The captain must control the rudder to save the crew and get everyone to their destination.

The final metaphor is something else entirely, yet with almost the whole west coast on fire it is a very apt analogy today. The tongue can be like fire. A tiny spark can set a mighty blaze. My son contacted me this week from Oregon to say that ash was falling like snow at his house from a fire 50 miles away. For the past two months the air has been unbreathable from smoke. Imagine having to keep your child inside during most of the summer.

Fires like the ones ravaging the west coast right now start with a spark. Something tiny and seemingly harmless erupts into a great conflagration. Drought has made the situation as bad as it is, and ironically the more fire there is the more drought there will be. It is a vicious cycle. The same thing happens in society. If the conditions are right, if society is already tense and divided, words can spark massive outrage and cause untold damage, resulting in further division and even more anger. Evil and charismatic leaders like Hitler knew this. Hitler deliberately used his words to direct mobs to do his bidding. And he used the power of his words to start a war that cost the lives of fifty million people. Leaders must be especially careful because the words of a leader can have a long lasting and far-reaching impact. It is the words of leaders that start fires, and things can spiral out of control. A leader may rouse a mob, only to find out down the road that he or she can't control it. The mob is the one in charge, and we all know how low the IQ of a mob is. I can't find any scientific data on it, but my favorite author Terry Pratchett said that the IQ of a mob is the IQ of its dumbest member divided by the number of people in the mob. Mobs are always destructive things, and mobs are whipped up by words, words that tap into rage, fear and self-justification. In 1834, mobs in New York City made up of literally thousands of people rioted for an entire week until military intervention took place. They attacked the homes and churches of white abolitionists and African Americans. The total death toll is unknown. A mob burned down black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma a hundred years ago in 1921. They murdered at least 300 people, and then hid what they had done. A mob attacked our capital building this year on January 6th 2021. Human beings have not changed. And mobs can even operate online. Words can be used to manipulate large groups today through social media. Group think is NOT intelligent thinking.

The tongue can be used in destructive ways by people as individuals, or by those with influence over the fate of a small group. But it generally takes a leader to start a fire, which is why James urged such caution to those who were teachers. Teachers were highly respected. Teachers were listened to. Today's equivalent might be pastors, politicians, leaders of advocacy groups, celebrities, professors and authors.

While political and divisive social rhetoric are one area of potential damage words can do, however, simple gossip can also destroy. One sentence can demolish reputations and careers, and thanks to social media, anyone, not just leaders, can do this. It may not cost the lives of 50 million people, but a rumor started takes on a life of its own. Businesses can be forced to close. Teenagers, overwhelmed by online bullying, take their own lives. Words can literally kill.

After everything James writes we're almost left with the impression that we should all just take a vow of silence. But it is also the word that brings life.

The gospel of John describes Jesus as the Logos, sometimes translated “word.” And God spoke the world into existence. The right words can help us through the toughest of times. We do actually bless one another with our words. James claims that it should be impossible for good and bad to come from the same source, but they do! Words can heal and lift up. Words can bring new life into a dark and fearful situation. Words can sustain us.

Everyone has moments when we open our mouth and what comes out is just not right. Reporters are always lurking around those in the public eye to catch a good one. Gerald Ford once said, “Things are more like they are now than they have ever been.” Al Gore claimed that, “A zebra does not change its spots.” George W. Bush had so many they were called “Bushisms.” Does anyone remember him saying, “Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?” Most of us now know that Sarah Palin “can see Russia from her back yard.” And Donald Trump is “a very stable genius” who recommends injecting bleach. But saying the wrong thing by accident is different from saying the wrong thing deliberately. We all know stupid. We’ve all done stupid. Malice is another thing altogether.

James says, “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.” We can offend people with our words. We can wound people with our words. We can deceive people with our words. And the key to all of it is that whatever is in our heart, it will come out in our words. We may have convinced ourselves that we are not bitter or jealous or angry, but our words will betray us every time. We’ll make a snide remark. We’ll use sarcasm and claim we were just joking. We’ll find reasons to berate people that we think are justified. And we could just lose our temper completely and blow up. Whatever is in there, it will come out. The essential ingredient of controlling what we say, therefore, is addressing what we think. To control what comes out of our mouth, we need God’s help to get rid of the evil in our hearts and minds.

While we’re sorting out our insides however, we do still have to speak. Perfection is a wonderful goal that we will never reach this side of heaven. So before we blurt out whatever it is we are about to say, we can also ask ourselves these four questions:
Does it need to be said?
Does it need to be said by me?
Does it need to be said now?
And finally, keeping the Golden Rule in mind to treat others as I would want to be treated, how can I say it in a way that it will be received? How can my words bring healing instead of harm? Amen

Isaiah 50:4-9

⁴ The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

⁵ The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears;
I have not been rebellious,
I have not turned away.
⁶ I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.
⁷ Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

James 3:1-12

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. **2** We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. **4** Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. **5** Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. **6** The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, **8** but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. **10** Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. **11** Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? **12** My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.