

Sept 13, 2009 at 1000hrs - Ladner United Church  
 Jim Short – Preacher

## The Book of James – Part 2 – The Tongue and the Power of Words

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### **James 3:1-12**

3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

3:2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

3:3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

3:4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

3:5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

3:6 And the tongue is a fire. 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.

3:7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

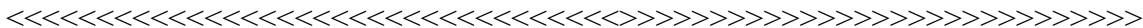
3:8 but no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

3:9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

3:11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

3:12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.



Today’s sermon is Part 2 of a Four Part Sermon Series on the New Testament Book of James:

- Week 1 – Introduction
- Week 2 – Speech and the Power of Words
- Week 3 – Anger and Conflict Management
- Week 4 – The Power of Prayer

And by way of a refresher here is some basic information about the book of James and its themes:

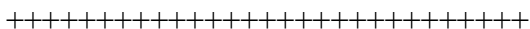
- a) In terms of authorship – opinions are split between the author being James, the Brother of Jesus or someone using James’s name...whoever it is – it is someone who knows the tradition of Jesus
- b) God is the “Giver of Gifts” and the Father/Mother/Parent of all gratitude – all good gifts come from God – nothing bad – all that happens that is sinful, unjust, and evil, of death is not of God.

The gentleman who wrote “The Year of Living Biblically” (A. J. Jacobs) and attempted to follow all the rules and directions of the Bible for a year – was asked during a CBC radio interview Friday – what was the long lasting affect of that year which is described in the book – he answered that his sense of gratitude increased – he found the God James was speaking of...

- c) James is in the Greek literary Tradition of Diatribe and like the Hebrew Wisdom literature – It’s a group of sayings put together into a kind of sermon/lecture – it’s like New Testament Twittering covering a variety of topics
- d) The over all theme – as a Mature Christian/as a Christian Community – a minority community in a secular culture – your faith and your works – what you believe and say – connected with your life in a way that people experience it as well as they hear it...

With the goal of achieving what James calls the Royal Law – “love your neighbor as you love your self...” of as I said two weeks ago – using the catch phrase of the Hebrew scriptures that describes the whole law – “widows and orphans”...

(Feasting on the Bread Commentary – Proper 18 Year C, Volume 4): James describes the “integration of thought, will, action and context... Not faith or works but faith and works made coherent in action.”



Today’s passage is about the power of the tongue and the words it utters:

Using the image of the human tongue (Jewish theology uses human parts to understand the diversity and wonder of the human person i.e. the bowels are the place where feelings reside)

We know that words have power

Many of us grew up chanting in the school yard sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me...

It was more hope and wishing that reality:

And I'm am guessing that each of us could tell a story when someone in our life  
Who was  
important to us  
had power, whom we trusted  
Or authority over us...

And they said something that hurt us right to the core...

In Grade 5 – Mr. Quillden told my mother at an interview that she had – I was there – that I was not smart and in terms of education I would not make very much of my life...I heard that he was saying that I was stupid...

That remark haunted me for many years...

The tongue – speech can be used to compliment and build up or destroy and beat someone down...

We live in a world where in the last years many of us have experienced that even in the public realm...

Restraint around words and speech has vanished...

Last week President Barack Obama was addressing the United States Senate on health care reform and in the midst of his speech – a republican senator yelled out “you lie”

For James – the small tongue – reported to be one half of one percent of your body weight has  
A disproportionate amount of power...

The tongue is like a bit in a horse's mouth...the rudder of a ship that can change its direction...or the spark that sets the forest a blaze...

And the tongue

Has the power to both praise God and pray...and to curse others, complain (5:19) and swear (5:12)

Words in James' understanding (and in the Hebrew Scripture) are understood to have great power – your words  
Are who you are...

In the Hebrew tradition it was the “word of God” that created all the world... words are not used lightly... because God is so holy – you don't say the name of God and when you spell it you spell it without the vowels... uttering a curse is not a light thing

Hence – the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment reflects that: “You shall not bear false witness” again – focusing on words...

And our words, how we speak and how we use them reveal who and what we are... they are a window into our heart...

The tragedy of the modern world is words in our vernacular have lost their sacred power... in the internet age – we are overwhelmed so much so by millions of words in competition for our attention...

So much so that even with once respected institutions – law, church, education, politics when they speak – we routinely do not trust their words... and are cynically disposed to not believe what is said...

Perhaps there was a time when you could seal a complex bargain with a handshake and one's word has power...

But it does not seem so now:

If you have followed for example: the debate about the BC Government's Role in the business of gambling...

Legitimate gambling was sold to the people of BC on the promise that its profits would be used to fund things like sports, social programs and the arts – that was the carrot

And the present government when in opposition promised it would never expand gambling... which it is currently doing – making it possible for someone to have half a million dollars in a government account for on line gambling that could all be bet at once and lost... all the while through health agencies we know that the addictive problem of gambling and its consequences...

And has now cut back the number and amount of grants... and I don't say this to be critical of one party over the other but as an example of what has happened to words in our society....

Because of this reality – need to heed more James' warnings:

Challenge is what tames the tongue and turns it to God's will...

To let our words come forth from the heart that is renewed and loved unconditionally by God's grace in faith from Jesus Christ...

For James...the spark that sets the raging destructive faith comes from the heart...

Not the organ that pumps blood or the place of romantic feelings but from that mysterious center that determines who and what we are...

The Talmud says that the tongue is the pen of the heart...

Our hearts are under the influence of sin, death and evil – separated from God...

In the terms of modern depth psychology – we would say the same thing with different words...

When we don't love ourselves, when we have been hurt, abused, injured and broken and destroyed inside...when our hearts are anxious, fearful, rejected, broken – they our words are likely to be toxic and poison

Our words will reflect that reality and say more about ourselves than others...

Now:

Couple of challenges for us to think about:

a) What profession does the text begin with?

Teachers...we immediately think of paid professionals in the educational system – and it's true – your words and how they are used are important...

Teachers know the potential and power of their words...for good or evil...but here James is talking about the Christian community and in it – everyone is a kind of teacher – we all speak and we have people who listen to us...our words influence others and must reflect God's wisdom – I'm not talking about having intellectual capacity or book knowledge but true wisdom...

In a way we are all “teachers”

It takes a village to raise a child....

An electronic entertainment complex or a computer game can impart learning but it cannot raise a child...

b) When is our words “gossip” in the worse sense of how we understand it - destroying other’s lives...?

Oscar Wilde – If you can’t say something good about people, come sit by me...”

Or the truth or information that enables us to care and support others...when we speak of someone what is our motivation and our goal

c) When should we speak or not speak:

James again:

So easy to speak slander...silent to rebuke the exploitation of the poor...

Courage to stand: in a culture – where slander, gossip. Hurtful words have been normalized in the electronic entertainment age

Why it is that it seems so easy to speak up and slander and put someone down but so hard to stand and be the voice to the voiceless or speak out against injustice and abuse...

and my favorite pet peeve...Religious trash talking – you know some of my favorites on that - prosperity gospel – bribe people with false promises of the wealth and goodness and homes and stuff God will give them if only they believe...handing out a glib superficial God like a sugar candy...

The tongue needs to find its home in a heart loved by God... a heart that Jesus came, died and was resurrected for...

As Saint Augustine said – our hearts are restless O God until they find their rest in you:

Or from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible – The Message – Since you know God cares, let your words show it...)

Luther’s Small Catechism: (Gridiron Reflections – Paul J. Nuechterlin)

“We are to fear God so that we don’t tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander, harm or destroy their reputations, come to their defense, speak well of them, interpret everything they do in the best possible light

James 1:19

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...” next week we move onto speaking about anger....

