

***THE SPOKEN WORD***

Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12

More than a thousand firefighters battled a wildfire for two weeks in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The fire started on August 24, 2000, and was not contained until September 8. Meanwhile, more than eighty thousand acres of valuable timber burned. Janice Stevenson, age 46, pled guilty to second degree arson, after admitting that she stopped by a road on August 24, lit a cigarette and tossed a still-burning-match out the window. She was sentenced to five years in prison and ordered to pay \$42,204,155.48 in restitution. She admitted that she saw a small patch of weeds begin to burn, but “she looked at it and decided to leave anyway.”

In the passage of James that is before us today, the writer exclaims “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.” Like starting a forest fire, producing a “wildfire” with our tongues requires little effort. Rumors, half-truths, grumblings, sarcastic remarks, hurtful things said in the heat of anger – all these smoldering matches have the potential of burning down acres of office morale, family peace, and church unity.

That is just one of the analogies James uses to speak about one of the most common topic in wisdom literature – the righteous person’s speech. Now, James’ epistle does not exactly fall into the category of a Wisdom book. But he does manifest many of the same concerns that we find in the wisdom books of the Old Testament and Judaism. James is especially concerned with speech that manifests envy and selfishness and is harmful to others believers. Though James begins by referring to teachers, and those who may want to be teachers, it is good to be reminded that this passage is directed to the Christian community, especially those who desire to be “rabbi” or “teachers”, since in this first-century Judaism the position of “rabbi” and “teacher” was a place of honor and prestige.

I want to think with you today about the power of your words. Words can hurt or heal -- they can tear down or build up. Words are powerful. The tongue, while a relatively small member of the human body, has the power to set the whole course of a person’s life. Timely, well-chosen words can preserve friendships, bring reconciliation with others, and most important, please God, whereas hasty and ill-chosen words can wreak havoc in personal relationships, harm the people of God, and bring God’s judgment. Look at the world around us. There is ample evidence around us to verify James’ assertion that our words have the potential to be lethal. Instead, as followers of Christ, our words ought to be healing words; they ought to bring grace and peace; they should build up and not tear down, heal rather than kill, encourage rather than discourage.

Think about the many ways we use our words: we name the world and each other, and at least in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality. Once the names take hold, they have a tremendous power and tenacity for good or for evil. Labels given in elementary school often travel with children for the rest of their lives. Nicknames given in early youth, become a standard in life.

As Christians, we are called to refuse the form of power that is practiced in the ideologies that set nature on fire all around us. The deceitful words of those in power, the words of blessing and cursing from the same mouth, these words we are called to reject. The political season has already begun to sling the words of half-truths, my-truths, and truths that can influence.

However, have you ever thought that the power of words, in some sense, shows the image of God in us? It is by the power of the Word that God created the universe. When God said, "Let there be..." there was- 11 times in the Creation story! It is the Word become flesh that brought us salvation. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says, "The Word of God is living and powerful -- it is sharper than any two edged sword." [Heb. 4:12]

Today's scripture reading from the letter of James is a critical test of Christian maturity. Paul teaches us that the Holy Spirit wants to shape the character of Christ in us. If you want to ask yourself the question, "*How am I doing?*" Listen to this quick assessment from James 3:2. The Living Bible puts it this way, "*If anyone can control his tongue, it proves that he has perfect control over himself in every other way.*" Maybe you have heard this definition: "*A mature Christian is one who would not hesitate to sell their talking parrot to the town gossip.*"

Consider for a moment the wonder of our power of speech. When we hear a word, the physical movement that enters our ear and then inner ear activates 24,000 little nerves which react through the limbic system and results in the pituitary gland sending hormones into the body. Our whole physical system reacts when we hear words of care or condemnation. When we hear words that bring us pain or anxiety, the physical-chemical reaction takes 72 hours to subside. No wonder some people live in a perpetual state of agitation and upset!

The story is told of a man who lived in a highland village in Scotland. He passed along a story about another man for whom he did not care. The story, he thought to be true. When the story got around the village, it utterly destroyed the man. His family, his job and his integrity were all devastated by the rumor mill. He finally had to leave town -- a ruined and defeated man.

As you might have guessed, the fellow who passed the story along discovered that the rumor was false. He had helped to destroy an innocent man with his tongue. He went to his pastor (whom they called "Dominie") and said, "Dominie, I have destroyed a man with my words" and he told his pastor the whole story. "Please Dominie," he said, "I am sorry -- can I be forgiven this sin?"

The pastor told the man that this was not so simple and told him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the fellow thought this to be a strange request for a pastor to make, he really wanted forgiveness, so he followed the instructions to the letter. At last he came back to the pastor and said, "Dominie, I have done all that you asked, may I now be forgiven?"

"Not yet, my son," the pastor replied, "You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village!"

"But, Dominie -- I could never do that, the wind has carried the feathers away!"

"Yes," the pastor said, "And in like manner have your careless words destroyed an innocent man!"

**Indeed, thoughts unexpressed may fall back dead, but even God can't kill words after they're said!**

Too often we, like James points out, use the same tongue to bless God and to curse people made in the image of God. With the same tongue we sing songs of love in church and gossip maliciously about our neighbors. With the same tongue we utter prayers and berate our children and our spouses. We come to church and teach the word and tell ugly jokes with the same tongue. The tongue of a sanctified person should be whole, single, and consistent in its speech.

We all fall short, and not one of us is without sin, however, as we closer to God and become one with God, we can use our words to tell the Good news of God's love, rather than give in to the world that finds fault, demeans, and belittles. You see, **the key to taming the tongue is to bring our lives more completely under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.**

If God's word does not show up in the flesh of a congregation – is those who hear the word do not also incarnate the word – then the tongue has worked a wicked spell on them. “Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46)

James suggests that the remedy for “tongue toxins” is a steady practice of faith.” It all can be boiled down to this: to love the neighbor as the self is the way of wisdom, in this world and the next.” Amen.