

Steering the Ship

Menno Mennonite Church
September 15, 2024

Purpose: To explore the challenges of speech and how it impacts who we are and what we do.

Message: The power of speech cannot be underestimated, and must always be taken with sincerity.

Scripture: James 3:1-12 (I will read); Isaiah 50:4-9 (Please read)

Synopsis: With James the hits keep coming. Now we need to consider how our speech forms and deforms community. It begins with a necessary confession: no one can tame the tongue. We must acknowledge that despite our best efforts, that which we say can often far out distance what we do. Yet within this, we are invited time and again to turn our attention to the way and means of how our words, ultimately do matter.

James 3:1-12 (MSG)

3 Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends.
Teaching is highly responsible work.
Teachers are held to the strictest standards.
And none of us is perfectly qualified.

We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths.
If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true,
you'd have a perfect person, in
perfect control of life.

3-5 A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse.

A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain
sets a course in the face of the strongest winds.

A word out of your mouth may seem of no account,
but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!

5-6 It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire.
A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that.
By our speech we can ruin the world,
turn harmony to chaos,
throw mud on a reputation,
send the whole world up in smoke
and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

7-10 This is scary: You can tame a tiger,
but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done.

The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer.
With our tongues we bless God our Father;
with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image.
Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

10-12 My friends, this can't go on.
A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it?
Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they?
Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they?
You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole
and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?

We all have our list of the words that ought not be uttered. Most of them are the four lettered sort; small; fricative and satisfying. One of the fascinations that I have in this role is watching people as they understand the role that I play. I especially enjoy being on a call in the general populus and in different worlds and non-church agenda. You know: the times when people let their guard down. Over conversation it might come out that the role in which they are meeting me is not my only role in life and living and I get to tell them what else is important to me—really what is really important most important to me—that I am a pastor. It is always interesting to watch people rearrange themselves in light of what they now know and understand, applying what they understand the term pastor to require of them by way of their list. I can see their eyes slide off to the side as they consider what has been said, done and all the rest. Every so often even I have people go through their recent recording and proceed to apologize for their language, reducing the work of being a person of faith to making sure that you don't say the naughty words that we all know are out of bounds. There is always a morbid fascination in watching people put on their going to church attitude with them based on someone who, for them, brings church with them everywhere they go.

That's how we usually go about it: we have church language and the language that we use when we drop the wrench on our toe. We're not proud of it, nor particularly good with it, but by in large, we know what flies and what doesn't. Even in the current vogue of shading speech with increasing quantities of blue for the value of shock, radicalism, or whatever, there remains the concept of things that we just don't say. And rightly so. Because it is a good place to start at any rate. As people of faith we do well to speak in such a way that doesn't scandalize or betray that which is not our own, not to be the exemplar of Christian virtue by swearing without using swear words per say, often substituting in the acceptable for diet alternates for the fuller strength implications, but because the fashion of expression being more the art of seeing how much you can say that would get the bleep is just not suitable of who and what we are. If we are people who respect other people we should speak in such ways not to set a prudish standard, but to show and bear respect to other people.

But most of the time that is where we leave the work of training tongue and minding our speech. So long as you are not vulgar your are half way there. What is said and not said has an echoing impact not simply because of the words that we use or not, but based on what we actually say and not say, and the way that we chose to say it. This is a far different and difficult

task that goes well beyond the-words-that-must-not-be-uttered, but comes and lives with us where and how we are. How is it that we speak on the whole of life and about people especially, both when they are standing right in front of us and where they are out of sight and out of mind. Where do we take our speech to speak truth clearly, and precisely, sometimes speaking that which can hold our anger and frustration with the world as it is and how it is while also retaining the person about whom we are speaking as the sacred child of God that they are. That's the task: reflecting the kingdom and reality of God's love in what we say and how we say it. James is calling us to no less, and that is a challenge to be sure.

As is his way, James is quick to outline for his congregational readers the nature of the advice he is giving. His audience seems to be a group of the body that has formed in the passion of the word, but, with time, has taken on the difficult work of translating the Spiritual passion of the moment into the shared practice of the long term, and effort that is always way more complicated than we can ever imagine. Our speech, he seems to say is a gift of the finest value and of great importance. But as such it also carries a huge liability to it as well. Say what you will about James, but there is a radical honesty at work here: No one has tamed the tongue and our speech will always be problematic. To give it a more modern twist we might too add no one has tamed their own comments and memes as well.

We know this to be true. Every last one of us can tell our stories of woe around that which was said to us, about us, and by us that failed the better intentions of our faith. It is not just that which is mean, either. Sometimes, it is the precisely phrased words spoken at precisely the wrong time for us to hear them in their best light. Worse still is the deafening silence that we sometimes receive in our most vulnerable moments, the awkward words not spoken giving space for the imagination that is so often far worse than anything that perhaps could have been said. I can't tell you the number of times that I have heard that have very little to do with what was said out loud and a whole lot more to do with what was not said at all. The list goes on and on and on—we know it well because it is the nature of our humanity. It happens where ever two or three are gathered; offense can follow. None of us are perfect at this—James says so himself. Fire, as he uses as a metaphor for the working of the tongue and the word is a great power. It has the power to destroy and run riot if we let it, but it also has the power to warm and work as well, bringing us closer to the flaming Spirit that can also dwell within it.

Maybe that is where we need to go in considering this words to find the good news. James goes so far out of his way to describe the power of our language to be within it in order to underscore the power at work that we are presented with. The same mouths that pour forth praise can also pour forth poison just as easily. Perhaps the point here isn't absolutely the poison at work but rather the power that it contains. As cautious and careful as we must be with our words, we also must speak when and how the Spirit convicts us to do so—for in that there is also power goodness and progress. The solution to meanness in what we say and do is not particularly to say nothing (though, as we were taught as kids, if you have nothing to say...) so much as it is speaking with an empathy that refuses to dehumanize anyone, even those with whom we vigorously disagree with and distrust. Maybe taming the tongue is less about finding our ways to cheer for our team and our allegiance—what ever the label we happen to prefer at a given moment—but to find ways of speaking to the ideas and notions that shape and move us in a way that speaks more to shared humanity than our chosen brands and preferences. Perhaps in it all, we need not despair for want of taming the tongue, but to recognize it for what it is: the seat of great power and promise, full of the working of the Spirit even while we must be prepared with full humility and honesty to take responsibility for that we say that does become bruising and damaging, stopping the fire hopefully before it burns out of control.

How we speak of each other, about each other and around each other matters, often a great deal. As opposed to limiting our speech to the “thou shall nots” of life, we do well to consider the whole. Perhaps we would do well to consider actually including more four-letter words in our life. There are words we avoid not because we find them vulgar, but often because we find them beyond our scope and thinking in the world. They are hard words. They are complicated to make work, yet they remain essential to the life of discipleship.

I wonder how we would be different if we included more of the challenging four-letter words in our life. Might we think about *work* less as an obligation one has to undertake for the sake of pay and responsibility, but also as the opportunity we are given to be about the business of God in the world, each in our own way? If we spoke more of *duty* not as an obligation that one takes under threat of you do this or else, but rather as the behaviors to which we are called because it is there which our allegiance and joy lies, might we think differently about what it means to be a practicing Christian in the world today. If we spoke of *Love* less as the state of one's heart and emotions around the individual of our desire and our empathy, but as the active

demonstration of that grace that was once shown us in the very incarnated form of God with us, it will absolutely change how we understand who we are and what we do out of that love in responding into the world. If we, like the Hebrew prayer—hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one—and to in hearing be changed, would we dare to hear and speak our challenging four letter words more often? Might our hearing them shape how we embody the actions they represent? The hearing will shape us. And the shaping will help us in the ongoing work of using that we have been given of God to its best use.

Our word become the rudders of our ship. They steer us whether we are mindful of them or not. May we know them and the Spirit that dwells within them well, and speak fully in *Faith, duty, love, and most of all: Hope.*