

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands
Sunday, February 9, 2020 – All Church Sunday
Rev. Cheryl Raine

The First Reading is Matthew 15:10-18

¹⁰ Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, ***“Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”*** ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then Jesus said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ ***But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.***”

The Second Reading is James 1:1-12

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. 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 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 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. 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! 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.*** ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ ***From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.*** ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

The Message is entitled *In Need of Taming*

We are people of many tongues, different languages, that is. And this morning we have been blessed to hear different languages spoken. Yet, all of us, no matter what our language, struggle to tame our tongues, for who among us has never said a harsh word to another? I don't know if any of us could raise our hands affirmatively, unless we had not yet learned how to speak!

Leo Aikman reminds us that we can tell more about a person by what he says about others than you can by what others say about him. I remember an incident from my corporate days. I had spent a few years building a cohesive team and we worked hard to be truthful with one another in difficult situations and to keep disagreements within our own management team while putting in every effort to resolve them. We also practiced words of praise for each other outside of our team, for we knew the health of team depended on it.

Well one day, I got a phone call from someone on my management team who was on a special assignment. He shared with me that he was shocked when a peer of mine from another

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operating region started saying some very unbecoming things about me as a manager, wondering how my employee could even work in my organization under my leadership. I listened intently to all that was shared with me, remembering James' advice, "Be slow to speak." When my employee finished, I simply paraphrased Aikman's thoughts, saying, "You probably learned more about him than you did about me," or as Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart."

"What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart." Our words reveal our hearts and I wonder what our words reveal? If our words demean or belittle others, is our heart rooted in God's love? If our words cause chaos and destruction, is our heart simply hardened, stone cold? Reformer John Calvin wrote about the tongue that proceeds from the heart, saying, "A slender portion of flesh contains the whole world of iniquity." While James bluntly says, "The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison... set on fire by hell," and it needs taming.

The children's saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt," is just not true. Words that roll off tongues directed at us can hurt and harm us deeply. I imagine most of us can bring to mind without a lot of effort words that have hurt or harmed us, words that have discouraged us or destroyed our dreams, words that have thrown mud on our reputations or created chaos in our relationships. At some point words have torn us down rather than built us up. As the writer of Proverbs reminds us, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

That is why James begins this section by saying, "Don't be in a rush to become a teacher, [for] teaching is a highly responsible work." I will never forget one of my first pastoral visits. I was heading to an Alzheimers' care facility with a man to visit his wife. I was a fledging pastor in a car with a man more than twice my age and he asked me a question that instantly made me aware of the power I had been given simply because of my role as a teaching elder. Before I responded to his vulnerable question, I prayed for wisdom from above so that I would do no harm as I responded. I had power in that moment to dispense death or life.

James says that for those of us who teach, our words will be held to a stricter standard. This alone should cause all teachers to be ever more mindful of their words. Even though James makes it clear that none of us are really qualified to teach, for all teachers will err. As author D.M. Doriani wrote, "Teachers are especially vulnerable to failures in speech because their role demands that they speak so much. More words mean more errors." As your pastor, I do not take lightly the responsibility and privilege I have as a teacher. Hence, why my daily prayer is for wisdom. Even so, I will err at times and my words will not be hopeful or helpful. Although, James starts this section focused on teachers, his teaching about the tongue which proceeds from the heart is for the whole church. All of us need to be mindful of the power of our tongues, of our words to one another.

As you heard in the reading of this passage, James uses multiple metaphors to help us gain insights about the power of the tongue. The power of the tongue is like a jockey who weighs a mere 100 pounds, yet can control the direction of a horse that weighs a thousand pounds with a small bit. The power of the tongue is like a small rudder that can alter the direction of a large ship. The power of the tongue is like a spark that can set a forest on ablaze. After sharing this particular simile, James bluntly says, "The tongue is a fire." And he is not referring to a cozy fire that warms us on a cold winter evening. He is saying our tongues are like a fire that cannot be

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controlled or tamed, like the one that raced through and consumed the town of Paradise or the fires that continue to consume everything in their paths in Australia.

James doesn't let up yet, for his climatic indictment of our tongues is its doubleness, "How can it be that curses and blessings come out of the same mouth?" How did that corporate peer of mine speak only words of encouragement and support when we were face to face, yet behind my back and to one of my employees he spewed venomous barbs about me? From the same mouth came blessings and cursing, yet James emphatically says, "This ought not to be so."

This ought not to be so, yet as I wrote in an article for the Redlands Daily Facts in October of 2018, "Words that are not nice seem to be the norm today." Words that are designed to demean and belittle fill twitter feeds, Facebook posts as well as media headlines. It seems that as a nation we have learned the art of always finding something not so nice to say about others. Have we totally forgotten the iconic wisdom of Disney's character in Bambi named Thumper learned, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all?"

"Be slow to speak," said James, because our words can be like sparks of fire that cause immense destruction. Have you ever read the poem entitled, *Children Learn What They Live*? Let me share with you the first few lines: "If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn. If children live with hostility, they learn to fight. If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy. If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty." Friends, our words have the power of death or life, the power to affect the present and the future.

James is writing to the church, writing to you and me today, because we need wisdom from above to tame our tongues. We need wisdom from above to be able to choose our words so that they will encourage and build up, and be life giving and not death dealing. And this wisdom from above conditions our hearts, for what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. This wisdom from above, from the source of all love, is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. James sums up in a few lines all that he has taught so far. He is reminding the church that our hearts need to be rooted in God's love. For then and only then, we will seek God's wisdom and learn to control our tongues and what proceeds from our mouths.

Author Ken Wood in his Bible Study on James shares about an incident that forever marked Kathleen Parker's life. Parker is a writer for *The Washington Post*. Listen to her story: "My high school English teacher called on me to identify the parts of a sentence he had written on the blackboard. I was clueless. I hemmed and hawed, and finally blurted out something so clearly wrong that the entire class simultaneously erupted in laughter. I clearly remember my teacher whirling around to face the class. His face was bright crimson, his voice shaking with anger. "Don't you ever laugh at Kathleen again," he barked. And then came the sentence that altered my life. "She can out write every one of you any day of the week," said my teacher. "I started that day to try to write as well as he said I could. I am still trying."

That teacher's kind, encouraging words on a very ordinary day changed the course of Parker's life. In 2010, she received the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for "her perceptive, often witty columns on an array of political and moral issues, gracefully sharing the experiences and values that lead her to unpredictable conclusions." The words of Parker's teacher brought forth life and creativity and still do to this day. Can you recall encouraging words that changed the trajectory of a day for you or maybe words that even changed the trajectory of your life?

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I remember a time in my ministry at Garden Grove when I was at a low point. The weight of my first seven years and the 58 people I had already buried was taking a toll. The church was dying faster than it was growing and I had just finished conducting yet another memorial service for a member who had died. I remember with clarity how spent I felt. Then this deceased member's daughter came to me after that service and simply said, "God is using you powerfully, you are right where you need to be, for your ministry is deeply touching the lives of those you serve as pastor." I felt the power of her words immediately in my very being. They touched my soul and began the renewal of my strength and vision for ministry. Those words remind me that my labor in the Lord is not in vain. Yes, words, what proceeds from our hearts, have the power to give life.

So, I have to ask all of us this day. Do our words bring forth life in each other? Do our words encourage and cultivate hope in those we encounter? Or are our words fueled by the death dealing wisdom of the world where selfish ambition is celebrated and bitter and envious words are the norm, even when they are false and far from the truth?

Jesus said, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. [For] what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." Friends, it is the condition of our hearts that gives voice to our words.

James' practical teaching is reminding us of this truth, the same truth that Apostle Paul gave to the Corinthian church, when he said, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." Without a heart rooted in God's love, our tongues will never be tamed.

Friends, as people of faith what comes out of our mouths matter more than ever these days. That is why we need to heed James' advice and be quick to listen and slow speak. Pause a second or two or maybe even longer before you speak, giving yourself time to discern as to whether or not what is about to proceed from your mouth will reflect the heart of God. Only when we do this will we be able to choose our words wisely and call forth life in one another.

When we open our mouths, what do they reveal about the condition of our hearts? What are our words teaching others, especially our children? Listen to a few more lines from the poem entitled, *Children Learn What They Live*: "If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence. If children live with tolerance, they learn patience. If children live with praise, they learn appreciation. If children live with acceptance, they learn to love."

May our tongues be tamed by God's love at work within us. O God, may the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.