



“Speaking for the Heart”

a sermon by

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Moving in to our second week of Wednesday worship and tracing scripture lessons as brought to us by the ecumenical lectionary, our text this week continues in the Epistle of James. As we mentioned last week, James likes to stir things up in his letter with a series of what looks like mere moral imperatives, but that share a deeper message about the nature of the Christian life when you scratch the surface. I remind you that this was written by an unidentified author to an unknown audience. Our Scripture comes to us from the letter of James 3:1-12 .

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong wind to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 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! 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.”

Well, here is yet another text that I never would have picked to preach on. Discussing tongues from hell isn't exactly what I had in mind for our second week back in the season together. But, thanks to the lectionary, we have it before us today and sure enough, the book of James offers yet another stinging imperative for right living that can't help but make us squirm. I had to laugh after worship last week when one of your colleagues greeted me at the door after the service and said, “I didn't know that the authorship of the book of James was a mystery.” “You didn't?” I asked. “Oh no,” she answered, “I always thought that it was written several years ago by my mother.” James does have the capacity to make us feel a bit like the kid who has been told to sit in the corner and just think about what they have done wrong. I for one feel particularly incriminated by this text as one who has a tendency to deliver a word of hard truth- or at least a hard word- and, admittedly, not always in love.

There is no question that public rhetoric has the power to shape our realities. Thinking on the aftereffects of September 11, who didn't feel sick with fear and anger when hearing about the axis of evil? Or what heart didn't swell with pride as you took a bite of your freedom fries? Indeed, speech has been honed to a science in the political and commercial sectors so that every word is engineered according to the impression that so many marketing gurus wish to make on those of us who are just trying to figure out who to vote for or what deodorant to buy. But in the microcosms of our day to day language, James insists that there is also a greater cosmic reality that is at stake. While it wasn't exactly wisdom literature, I recently cracked open a fortune cookie that read, ‘the goal of rhetoric is persuasion, not truth.’ Of course I thought to myself,

'oh, little fortune cookie, you don't even know who you are talking to!' But this little cookie had a point- one that is terrifying to James and fuels his strong statements such as, "...the tongue is a fire, (it) 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." For the fortune cookie asserts that the power of the tongue rests in its ability to influence the world around us by the way it chooses to speak of it. And the book of James takes this truism a step farther, saying that our own tongue, like a mini free moral agent in and of itself, has the ability also to influence even us. It is not that James is so concerned that our speech mirrors the condition of our hearts, but rather that our speech that is so vulnerable to sin can also corrupt them. "For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue- a restless evil, full of deadly poison," he says.

A friend of mine recently sent me a devotion written by a man who lived in Texarcana- that town that is situated directly on the boarder of Texas and Arkansas, with half its boundaries in one state, and half in the other. The man talked about how he used to watch people snap photos of grinning family members straddling the boarder of the states next to the city sign, finding the experience of being in two places at once a source of interest and amusement and worthy of at least some sort of documentation. In much the same way, James suggests that we should take note that as believers in Christ we abide in two states at the same time. As a people of God we are caught in the tension of being in this world but not of it. We walk the line of striving after the kingdom of God while making ends meet here on earth, navigating temporal frustrations and anxieties of the day while keeping our minds fixed on the eternal and our tongue betrays this division, "With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God (he says). From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so."

James is concerned not just that we say one thing and mean the other but that, as a people who profess faith in Jesus Christ, who acknowledge God as their creator and the source of their sustenance and redemption, who were called into being by him and made in his image, when we bless God and curse our neighbor, we are not just losing a battle for self control, we are betraying the allegiance to God that we claim to have through faith in a fundamental way. You may recall last week that James argued that if you will allow your faith to truly touch your life then you should leave changed and live like it. In much the same way, James argues, if we believe in God and bless God and accept the story of our faith as truth, then we should take seriously what it means to be made in his image- an image that creates life and cultivates love, that builds up relationships through covenant promises and continues the efforts to draw the wayward and disobedient back to his side through the gift of his Word- whose object was truly truth and not persuasion. To do otherwise with our own words as children of God and followers of his Word in the world Jesus Christ is as absurd to James as a fig tree bearing olives, or salt water creating fresh. It's not that it would be morally wrong for these things to occur, its just that it would be completely inconsistent with their nature to do so and so, one would imagine, it should never happen.

What I like about James is that he forces us to hold the way we use our language and the way we speak to others according to the model of God. Not so that we will feel judged in our

perpetual imperfection but so that we will come to appreciate the power of speech to influence and in some cases even create reality. In Genesis one, God spoke and all things came into being. In a much smaller way our speech surely reflects the world that we live in, but it also has the power to shape it as well. For when we form words to use with or for or against another, we choose instantaneously whether we will speak a value that is consistent with the attitudes of a loving God and the good news of Jesus Christ, or if what we will speak will be in service to ourselves or perhaps something far more pervasive and less apparent like the boundaries of race and class, or the influences of the corporate structure and so many others. When we open our mouths to speak, we have the opportunity to continue God's creative activity and in breaking of grace into the world by reflecting our experience of God in our speaking and inviting others to know him through that experience. Or we can shape a reality for others and ourselves about our lives that suggests that God is being completely ignored.

There is a lot of talk about speaking from the heart. And as we see from James, our heart so often can't help but stand divided. And so I'm also interested in what it means to speak for the heart. To use the freedom that we have been given by a good and loving God to nurture our hearts and our souls and those of others around us by reinforcing with our words and our lives that we are undivided in our character as a people of God, that we bear fruit in our lives that is consistent with the vine, that fresh water indeed flows from us given by the streams of the water of life that is our Lord. As one pastor put it, "I want to live a faith that is a reflection of the cost of its eternal origin, not merely a reflection of my transient one. I want to feel the reality of where we sit. That the things we decide here are eternal ones. That our conversations mean something. I want to live in a manner that feels heroic, that turns the invisible into the visible, that is a solid intrusion of the eternal into the divided streets of humanity." As a small rudder steers a giant ship, so too does the simplest word influence the condition of hearts and the movement of grace in the world. So may we choose our words wisely and use them well. The work of the kingdom is at hand. Amen.