

“Taming the Tongue”
Isaiah 29:13-16; James 3:1-18;
Matthew 15:10-20

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Human beings are incredibly interesting. We can communicate with one another in a way we're not sure any other species really can. We can actually talk to each other and relay some kind of information. I know that it's not always a perfect path. The thing I think I want to say isn't always exactly what I say, and the thing that I say isn't always heard exactly as I want it to be heard, and then it may not have quite the reaction that I wanted it to have. Yet, that aside, we still communicate. We get our meanings across. We work at finding ways to talk with one another. We have this ability and it's an amazing thing.

It's also suggested that the fact that we can communicate, that we have language and can speak about our world, actually shapes what we think and what we can recognize. If you were Russian, you would have multiple words for blue—one for dark blue and one for light blue. We have two words for red—we have red and we have pink. Pink is just a lighter shade of red. Eskimos have a bunch of different words for snow. We tend to have one. How we see the world is in part defined by our language and how we use it. Language actually affects how we see the world and the way our mind works. Learning another language, some people say, opens up the world in some ways, to see things a little differently.

So as we think about how important language is and how it can shape our lives, I'm reminded that the words we say matter. If you are told about somebody before you meet them, you already have some kind of image of them. You already have a first impression shaped for you. Sometimes that first impression that was just a matter of somebody's description can take a long time to change, especially if it's not very accurate.

As we are thinking about the words we use and how they slip off our tongue, we are reminded of what James says about how important they are and what they can do. We all remember that old song, “It only takes a spark to get a fire going.” Well, sometimes that's a wonderful thing. If we're out camping, and I want to roast marshmallows, I need to have a spark to get that fire going. When we sing that song about “It only takes a spark” we are thinking about the spark of love, the goodness that we can ignite. But we also know the other side of that. It can only take a spark to get a forest fire going, as well, a great destructive force in our lives. James warns us of that danger. It's one of the reasons I think he's talking about teachers and how important it is to be careful about becoming a teacher. I'm not really excited about that advice on the first day of Sunday school, but it is a reminder to us how much what we say matters, how much what we talk about matters.

It really is pointing us to remember that there's both the negative that can come out of our mouths, or the positive. There are things like gossip, cursing, belittling, distaining, being sarcastic. There are all kinds of ways we can use our ability to speak in what I would call the negative way. Yet, there's the positive as well. We can use it to build others up. We can use it to apologize and forgive. We can use it to reveal Christ. We can use it to create together. We can use it for good or for ill.

It's interesting, there are those times we have those slips of the tongue where we share something we might not want to consciously share. It's that idea that out of us can come an incredible word of good or something that can cause real harm.

As we think about that, James is inviting us to work on how we use our language, what we say. He's inviting us to reflect on whether it's good or not, whether it's going to build up or not. James asks, "Who can tame the tongue?" No one can. And yet we are invited to think about it and try to change it. How then will it change? Part of it is our efforts, our trying.

Jesus invites us to recognize it not just what we say. It starts with what we think, what comes from within, what leads us to have the words that we have. Jesus says it's not what we take in but what comes out of us that defiles. It's incredibly hard. I don't know why it is that we have these desires to put others down, to share things we know we shouldn't share. Is it a sense of power? Is it a sense of making ourselves look better? I think it's incredibly hard to let go of the way we are pulled by that darkness and to allow Christ to be present, inviting us and guiding us and leading us to have come out of us that which is beneficial, that which helps. Instead of breathing fire, have a changed heart—a heart that enables us to speak from the heart in a way that shares the very love and grace of God.

Now if any of you can do that all the time, my hat's off to you because I think this is an ongoing process. It's a process of letting God in and letting the Spirit work with us and transform our hearts in a way that allows us to be consistent all the way from our heart to what we say. Sometimes I just have to work on what I say because my heart is still being worked on. It's not quite there. And yet, I know as I open to God there is that continual work of the Spirit. There is the work of God's love. There is the work of God's grace that continues to work on our hearts to transform them so that when we begin to recognize that we can, from our hearts, refocus our lives not on just the negative things around us but perhaps we can focus on the beauty God has given us, the grace that is in our lives, the moments of hope and wonder.

It's so easy to let the negative be what we focus on, and yet God has given us incredible life, incredible opportunities. If nothing else, it's incredible that we get to share this time together as a family of faith, that we get to be a people of God, to know that God loves us and loves all people. We just happen to be this group of people who get to share that love together.

We are invited to refocus on what God is inviting us to and to refocus on our praise of the One who invites us. In doing so, Jesus is suggesting we can change and that out of us can come something that is not defiling. We can bring goodness in what we say, and what we do, and who we are. James suggests that we can have a harvest of righteousness as we sow in peace. We can harvest righteousness. I think of that as the good life, the life that brings us together, that enables us to share. It comes out of sowing peace. We know our words can also sow destruction. Our words can divide or they can heal. Our words can help or hurt. But we are invited to sow peace, to sow words that bring the very grace and love of God into reality in our lives. Amen.