

## Proper 19, Year B

September 13, 2015

*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. 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.*

Some years ago, I responded to a request to visit a man who was dying of pancreatic cancer (for our purposes, I'll just call him Joe). He was at home, under hospice care and surrounded by an obviously loving family. Now Joe had been raised in the Episcopal Church, but had not attended church most of his adult life. When I first met him, he expressed deep regret and remorse at this. He told me, "You would think I could have given one hour to God each week."

When Joe died, I met with three of his family members to plan the funeral, and I asked them to tell me a little about Joe. **Each** one of them said - *emphasized*, in fact - "I never heard him say a bad word about anybody."

Which got me to thinking: "With whom is God more pleased? With all of us regular churchgoers, myself included, who nonetheless are guilty of subtly or not-so-subtly disparaging or backbiting other people – or is God *more* pleased with Joe, who didn't darken the door of a church, and yet **never** spoke an ill word about anybody? Was it not Joe who was fulfilling St. Paul's instruction to Titus to "speak evil of no one"? (Titus 3:2)

In today's Epistle reading, James writes (and I quote *The Message* translation):

A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—**or destroy** it! 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. This is scary: You can tame a *tiger*, but you **can't** tame a tongue... 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 [God]

made in his image. Curses and blessings *out of the same mouth!* My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it?

Now, you and I like to think that we are good people because we obey the laws, attend church, give of our time, talent, and treasure, have never been arrested for murder. But if James is right, then running down a person with our tongue is *equally* as evil as running down a person with our car. Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40) That goes for speech as well as action. When we speak ill of our brothers and sisters, we are speaking ill of Jesus.

St. Francis de Sales wrote:

With a single stroke of the tongue you can commit three murders. You kill your **own** soul, the soul of anyone who *hears* your slanderous comments, and the social life of your victim. It is spiritual homicide.<sup>1</sup>

And yet some weeks it seems that all I read, all I hear, all I deal with, are people saying bad words about other people – people in the news, people on social media, even church members speaking ill of other church members. And to be honest, nothing drains the life and energy out of me more. And yet I am at times complicit!

When you were a child, did your mother tell you what mine did: "If you don't have anything good to say about someone, don't say it"? How successful have you and I been in following that instruction? A few rash words can poison a family, a friendship, a congregation. We are all members together of the Body of Christ, all members together of the human race on this earth; we are all in the same boat. We cannot sink someone else's end of the boat and at the same time keep our own end of the boat afloat; we will all go down together.

British pastor Alan Redpath believed that before we say a word about another person, we should THINK: T-H-I-N-K. It is an acronym for five questions we should ask ourselves before speaking:

"T": is it True?

"H": is it Helpful?

"I": is it Inspiring?

"N": is it Necessary? and

"K": is it Kind?

Of course, what we are really doing in asking these questions is examining our own hearts. Jesus said, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart." (Matthew 15:18) Unkind speech comes from an unkind heart. "In order to be truly converted," writes Brother David Vryhof, "we must examine our intentions. **Why** am I tempted to speak in a hurtful way to this person? Where are these critical words coming from? ... How can I begin to change the way I think about this person or this situation? ...

"This descent into the heart is crucial because unless our **hearts** are converted we will never have much success transforming our **words** and our conversation...

“We cannot speak peaceful words if there is no peace in our hearts. We cannot offer life-giving words unless the Divine life is within us, ready to be offered to others. We cannot speak with compassion and love unless these virtues are actually growing in our own hearts.

“...We need pure hearts in order to utter pure words. Which is why we will be working on this for the rest of our lives. Purifying our hearts is a continuous process which involves opening our hearts to God day by day so that they can be transformed by Divine Love.”<sup>2</sup>

This past week, Queen Elizabeth II became the longest-reigning British monarch in history. In commenting on this, British historian and biographer Robert Lacey noted why he thinks Elizabeth is so respected and admired: it is largely because of what she does NOT say. She’s not famous for the memorable words that she has spoken or actions she has taken. In fact, says Lacey, it’s exactly the opposite. “This absolute refusal to say anything important,” noted Lacey, “this politeness, in an age of celebrity when everybody splashes their emotions and their feelings all over their personal phones, and politicians do the same — actually, someone who respects rules of civility and politeness **matters**.”<sup>3</sup> I think that what Lacey calls “respecting rules of civility and politeness” our baptismal vows (which we renewed last week) would call “respecting the dignity of every human being.” (BCP p. 305) Queen Elizabeth seems to have heeded St. Paul’s instruction to the Colossians: “Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.” (4:6, *The Message*)

But words can heal as well as wound! Did you catch the beautiful phrase in the reading from Isaiah this morning? It is becoming one of my favorite passages in the Bible:

The Lord GOD has given me  
     the tongue of a teacher,  
 that I may know how to sustain  
     the weary with a word.  
 Morning by morning he wakens--  
     wakens my ear  
     to listen as those who are taught.

“...the tongue of a teacher... to sustain the weary with a word... to listen as those who are taught.” It’s a perfect passage for us today, as we begin our formation classes for all ages. For all too often, words are said that hurt and wound. But this community, this body of Christ, this church family is called to sustain the weary with a word, and, being aware that none of us has all the answers or has it all together in this life, we listen as those who are taught, ready to be changed by the Living Word that comes through Scripture, Sacrament, and the loving hearts of those who bear the likeness of God.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, Chapter 29, pp. 201-202

<sup>2</sup> from a sermon published on the web site of the Society of St. John the Evangelist on September 13, 2009

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/09/09/438651047/a-milestone-for-a-beloved-monarch>