

“The Power of Speech”

James 3:1-12

By now I think everyone must know the name of Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina, the congressman who stood up during President Obama’s speech on Health Care on Wednesday evening and called out, “You lie.” He later apologized, but there was quite a to-do over the incident, in some ways overshadowing the President’s speech itself. Just two little one-syllable words, but what a ruckus they caused! Leaving completely aside the politics of the situation, it certainly illustrates that the words we speak can have enormous impact!

The New Testament writer James would agree. And, in fact, he would likely have some sympathy for Mr. Wilson and the explanation he offered as part of his apology, that his emotions got the better of him. “Of course they did,” James would say. “That’s the problem. This ability that humans have to communicate verbally (or as he puts it, the tongue) is uncontrollable. You can tame all manner of wild beasts,” he says, “but who can tame the tongue?”

Who indeed? Whatever we may think of that particular outburst the other night, who among us can claim never to have done something similar – let our emotions get the better of us and say something we later regretted? And, of course, one of the really big problems with speech is that once it is out there, once you have said whatever it is that you have said, there is no taking it back.

We saw the movie *Doubt* recently, with Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Hoffman plays the part of Father Flynn, a Catholic priest serving a New York City parish in the 60’s who is accused by Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep) of the sexual abuse of one of the students. In one of his sermons Father Flynn tells the following story. A woman was gossiping with a friend about a man she hardly knew – (Father Flynn pauses here to say to his congregation, ‘I know none of you have ever done this’). That night she had a dream. A great hand appeared over her and pointed down at her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt.

The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O’Rourke, and she told him the whole thing. “Is gossiping a sin?” she asked the old man. “Was that the hand of God Almighty pointing a finger at me? Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?”

“Yes!” Father O’Rourke answered her. “Yes, you ignorant, badly brought-up female! You have borne false witness against your neighbor, you have played fast and loose with his reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed!” So the woman said she was sorry and asked for forgiveness. “Not so fast!” says O’Rourke. “I want you to go home, take a pillow up on your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me!”

So the woman went home, took a pillow off her bed, a knife from the drawer, went up the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. (As the priest is telling this story, in the movie you see the woman doing this, and when she cuts the pillow you see feathers coming out of it and flying all over the neighborhood.) Then she went back to the old parish priest as instructed.

“Did you gut the pillow with the knife?” he says. “Yes, Father.”

“And what was the result?” “Feathers,” she said. “A world of feathers.”

“Feathers?” he repeated. “Feathers everywhere, Father!”

“Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!”

“Well,” she said, “it can’t be done. I don’t know where they went. The wind took them all over.”

“And that,” said Father O’Rourke, “is gossip!”

James, I have a feeling, would have liked that story, for James seems to get carried away with the negative side of human speech, the damage we can do to each other with our words. He calls the tongue a fire, a restless evil full of deadly poison. The illustration that he gives of what our words can do is not feathers flying from a pillow, but a huge forest fire that is started from a small flame, such as we have seen in the news in recent weeks from southern California. That, he says, is what the tongue is capable of. Gossip is certainly one example of the negative side of speech. I came across a quote this week by Oscar Wilde who said: "If you can't say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me."¹

I don't really think that I have to convince anyone here this morning that speech can be poisonous, or even that our own speech can be poisonous. I think we all realize that we can destroy one another with our words. Words have power. They have the power to persuade, to move, to incite, to encourage or discourage, to soothe or to agitate, to lift up or to crush and humiliate. We all know how easy it is to hurt people with words. Sometimes we do it unintentionally, inadvertently, a faux pas, a slip of the tongue. And sometimes it is intentional, the biting tongue, the slam, the put down, slander, toxic speech.

But unlike James, who calls the tongue a poisonous evil, I began thinking this week about the opposite site of that. I began thinking about the good that can be done with our words, the positive side. If James is telling us to we should try to tame the tongue, to stop ourselves from saying things that are hurtful and destructive, maybe my job this morning is to do just the opposite of that and to encourage everyone to speak those words that would be helpful, encouraging, uplifting, enlightening.

We all have had the experience of saying the wrong thing. I know I have. But we all have also had the happy experience of checking ourselves just in time and then later patting ourselves on the back for not saying what we might have said. "Thank goodness," we say to ourselves, "that I had enough presence of mind not to blurt that out!" What a relief!

But consider a different scenario. Consider the situation that there may be something that needs to be said. Heaven sent words meant to heal and restore. Words floating around up there somewhere in the air or possibly even in our heads. Words waiting for some human tongue to say them, express them. And if someone were to voice them it would be wonderful. If we are able, at least at times, to avoid saying the wrong thing, what about making a little more effort to say the right thing?

Diane grew up in a family that knew nothing about praise. She never remembers anyone in her family ever saying that she had done something well. She never heard, "what a beautiful picture you drew," or "nice job on cleaning your room," or "you sang beautifully today." Those words were there, somewhere, waiting to be said by someone. But no one came forward to express them. In this scenario if there is something wrong with the tongue it is not that it has been too active. Rather it has been too passive. How many things might we say that we don't say? Often it is only after someone is gone that we think to ourselves, "Why didn't I tell her what she meant to me?" "Why didn't I tell him the influence he had on my life?"

I don't remember which comedian it was who I heard tell this story. He was doing his act somewhere in New England where people are not known for being especially effusive. As he went through his routine, no one was laughing. He was dying on stage. There was no response. He had used this material before and it went well. Maybe his timing was off. After the performance, as he was leaving the building he overheard two people talking who had been at the show. One of them said to the other, "Man, that guy was funny! It was all I could do not to bust out laughing!"

I'm thinking of the power of the tongue for good, a power that often lies dormant. We keep it in, like the New Englander that kept his laughter inside, not wanting to do anything inappropriate, when the laughter was just exactly what the performer was hoping for. We keep compliments inside. We keep thoughts of appreciation inside. We don't share them.

We had friends many years ago, another married couple, the husband a minister in another church in the town where we lived. When Janet fixed a meal that Dale found to be especially good, the way he had of showing his appreciation was to do this (thumbs up). He would do it mid-mastication, not wanting to take time out from eating long enough to put his appreciation into words. For some reason, Janet didn't find this to be an especially appropriate way to offer a compliment on the meal. (Women are funny like that!) I have to admit my own deficiencies in this area. I'm working on changing it from "not bad," to something like, "thank you, honey, this is really delicious."

I don't know of any better illustration of the positive power of words than that told by Mary Ann Bird, in her memoir entitled *The Whisper Test*. Mary Ann was born with multiple birth defects: deaf in one ear, a cleft palate, a disfigured face, a crooked nose, lopsided feet. As a child, she suffered not only these physical impairments but also the emotional damage inflicted by other children. "Oh, Mary Ann," her classmates would say, "what happened to your lip?" "I cut it on a piece of glass," she would lie.

One of her worst experiences at school, she reported, was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." This was "the whisper test;" if the teacher's phrase was heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann always would cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she still could hear what the teacher said.

One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved and popular teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her, wanted to be her pet. Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher's desk. As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. "I waited for those words," Mary Ann wrote, "that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life." Miss Leonard did not say to Mary Ann, "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." What she whispered was, "*I wish you were my little girl.*"²

It not so much watching our tongue so that we don't say things that we ought not to say. Rather, for most of us it seems to me, it is searching for those words that are there somewhere within, words of healing, of nurture, of encouragement, and getting them out there, giving them voice. So let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God, our rock and our redeemer.

¹ *Heard About the Pastor Who...? Gossip as an Ethical Activity*, William Willimon in the *Christian Century*, October 31, 1990, pp. 994-996

² Long, Thomas G., *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, pp.85-86.