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Pentecost XVII & Proper 19
September 15, 2024
Text: James 3:1 – 12
Title: Sharp Tongues

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. If there is any doubt about the words in today's epistle reading describing the nature of the tongue, you only have to look around and open your eyes and ears to lay that doubt to rest. If you follow politics even a little, you can see the rhetoric get out of control on both sides of any issue, especially on major issues. This year's presidential campaign is certainly no exception with all of its twists and turns. Politics can almost always give us some perfect examples of what can be accomplished with an untamed tongue. It's a perfect arena for people to say all kinds of over-the-top things about an opponent, regardless of what side that candidate represents. Anyone who follows politics can hardly forget about Donald Trump and his notorious Twitter posts, even though he does seem to have toned things down this time around. If any public figure gives us a demonstration of what James is talking about in today's epistle reading, it would have been him during the 2016 presidential race. But that's only if you listened to one side of things. His opponents have been just as untamed as him over the past several years. I won't get into any of the specific things that have been said, but both sides of the political spectrum seem to have adopted more of a take no prisoners approach to political discourse in recent years.

In my preparations for today's sermon, I came across a fitting proverb from a tribe called the Tswana who live in the central African nation of Botswana. It says, "A pointing finger may turn back, but a word does not return." In the political arena, no matter the time of year, you can be sure that there will be any number of times that someone will wish that they had listened

better to these words of wisdom and not said anything at all. Because once you've said it, that's it. The words are out, and they can't come back.

But this wisdom doesn't just apply to politics. It applies to every aspect of life around us. People in general are less and less civil in the way that they talk to and about each other, and it's been made worse by the fact that you don't even have to look someone in the face anymore. Thanks to technology people can anonymously extend their vitriol and anger and outright hatefulness to an almost shocking level. Ask any teenager today about the things that they have read on social media about themselves or about someone else, and they could give you a crash course on just what it means to be a nasty person because of what they've seen or read online. Technology seems to have given us a free license to throw nasty and hurtful words out into the world which we would never dream of saying to someone's face or even out loud to someone else just because it can be done in total anonymity. If a person wants to say something vicious and not suffer the consequences of their words, then doing it online is a perfect opportunity.

In the middle of all of this comes James, the brother of Jesus, with his epistle to the Christians spread throughout the Roman Empire. He writes to them, "...if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, 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 things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being

can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

“From the same mouth” – that is *our* mouth – “come blessing and cursing” James points out. And yes, this shouldn’t be so, but it is, far too often. Even if we only type the words onto a screen and hit “send,” it’s the same thing as speaking them out loud. And how clear it is that we violate the Eighth Commandment in the process! In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes about these very things, “We should use our tongue to speak only the best of all people, to cover the sins and infirmities of our neighbors, to justify their actions, and to cloak and veil them with our own honor...There is nothing around us or in us that can do greater good or greater harm in temporal or spiritual matters than the tongue, although it is the smallest and weakest member.”

Again, if there’s any doubt about these words of either James or Luther, you only have to look around you to see the truth, and once you have done that, you only have to look inside of yourself to see it even more. Simple lies are everywhere; they mask selfishness. They cover over sin, and they corrode relationships. We lie to each other, and we even lie to ourselves. But the evil of the tongue isn’t limited to just lies, far too often we turn the truth into a weapon when we get caught up using only partial truths. And then we find ourselves trying to excuse the damage that we’ve done by convincing ourselves that, “I was only telling the truth!”

A perfect example of this can be found in the ways that some people confront the evils of abortion. Many consider that the righteousness of their cause justifies them in saying anything against those who support or practice such evil. They justify their vengeful and vicious words by declaring that they are only speaking the truth even as what they have said tears at the person

who hears it. The instruction of Ephesians 4:15 to speak the truth in love seems to be lost in the zealously of the cause.

So what are we to do? How do we tame the tongue and all that comes out of it? If even speaking the truth can be corrupted by our sinful natures and desires, what hope is there? On our own, none. James starts out this part of his epistle by saying that anyone who can perfectly control his tongue is a perfect person who is able to control his entire body. Can anyone here make that claim with a straight face? Of course not! That's why we're here because we know that we are far from perfect!

The vicious use of the tongue is merely the symptom of the disease of sin that goes so much deeper into every fiber of our being. But in spite of the restless evil of our tongues and hearts and our sinful nature's mastery over them, we have been harnessed by a new Master. James uses the analogy of a bit in a horse's mouth which can be used to control and guide the animal wherever its rider wishes to go. And he also talks about how the rudder of a ship can steer it and direct it wherever the sailors need it to go, even though it's a relatively small part of the overall craft. If we are left in control, then there is no control at all, but when God takes control, something entirely different happens.

We confess our sins. We confess that we have sometimes kept silent out of fear of retribution or the opinions of others, or that we have let our tongues loose to set our world into flames. We confess, and we repent. We ask God to give us the strength and courage to do better, that He change us by His grace and allow us to serve our neighbors as His gracious voice among the world. For we not only confess our sins, we also confess Christ our Light and our Hope and the Life of the whole world. And when we confess our sins then we can rejoice that

God is good. We can take joy knowing that He knows what He is doing, and that He works through us despite us and often even unknown by us.

God has brought us to the reward He has won for us by the cross and empty tomb. He has never abandoned us to our struggles. He hears our prayers. He is working all things together for good. We rejoice because we know the end of this struggle, that He has died for us and risen for us, and He is coming back to bring us home. He won't require us to stay in this evil place forever with a tongue that can't be tamed.

Our cursing and wickedness is turned into the blessing of our Lord and Father. God is given control as a part of the miracle of faith and salvation in His Son, Jesus Christ. The evil power of words is a common and human experience; but our Creator has done something new and wonderfully surprising: He has worded our mouths with praise and prayers and blessing and thanksgiving. He has harnessed our tongue to be used for His glory. By His tongue, with His Word, He makes a fig tree grow olives and a salty pool of water fresh and clean. In other words, by the sacrifice of His Son on the cross, He makes us into Christians. Yes, "A pointing finger may turn back, but a word does not return." And God's Word of mercy does not turn back, either. His Word, spoken through us and using our tongues, does wonderful things – for us, in us, and through us – with the power that only comes from God. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.