

**Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19 B) September 15, 2024 jj  
Rev'd Mark B. Stirdivant, Christ our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Augustine, Florida**

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Welcome aboard! For centuries, the Church has been described in terms of a boat or ship. So much so, that you even hear nautical terms being used from time to time. The area in which you are seated is called the nave, from the Latin for ship. The pulpit was the point where the navigator steered the ship with the wheel. Speaking of the Church in this way was first of all inspired by the writers of the Bible themselves. In chapter three of the Epistle of James, the brother of our Lord Jesus speaks to his fellow teachers of doctrine, that is, to fellow pastors. Of course, the words James writes by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit specifically for the vocation of his brothers in the ministry can also be applied in a general way by all Christians as they pursue their various callings in life. Now, the part of the ship that James is concerned with here is not something large and obvious like the mast or mainsail, nor even something that would look important like the captain or the charts and compass. No, for this miniature parable, we need to go below the water's surface, sweep away all the muck and algae, and focus attention on the rudder.

Such a small instrument, notes James, that can turn such a massive vessel. In the same way that bit and bridle, small as they are, can exert control upon a powerful horse. In terms of something more common today, thanks to electronics and hydraulics, a little tap of the foot on the brake pedal stops a whole car! We just expect it to work that way, but it is still impressive. Well, the small, yet mighty instrument that moves the ship of the Church is the tongue of the preacher that proclaims God's Word for all in the nave to hear it. And to speak rightly without stumbling, that preacher is to be completely trained. Here in the Epistle, the phrase "perfect man" should not be taken to mean "one without sin," but rather a "fully prepared preacher." The course must be set on

the one hand with the righteous Law of God, given to us in summary form in the Ten Commandments. This Law directs us in our life, but it also always accuses and condemns our sin and leaves us no option but to plead to Christ for help. On the other hand, proper steering of the ship comes from the preaching tongue's proclamation of the Gospel, namely, the gracious works of God for our sake leading to and including the holy death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

While the tongue of the preacher is the small, yet mighty rudder that directs the course of the Church according to God's Word, your own tongues in a similar way have important roles. Whatever callings that your heavenly Father has bestowed upon you, He who was the first ever to speak, has also given you your tongue to proclaim and teach His Word in the context that is appropriate for you. What you say is immensely important, perhaps more now than ever. They don't call this the "information age" for nothing. Messages can go to millions of people, all around the world, in seconds. Communication must be preserved pure and pristine, or else business would falter, relationships would crumble, and nations would erupt into chaos. Quick, convenient information can really help us, yet now, we can't afford not to be careful over what other people may know about us.

Whatever can do a world of good, can also in this fallen world of ours be implemented to wreak a staggering blow of evil. The Apostle takes great pains to warn the Church of the evil capability of the tongue. Perhaps your life has suffered damage at one time or another, thanks to the raging fire set ablaze by the tongue. Your own tongue could easily have hurt another, even when you had no idea you were doing it. Sticks and stones, contrary to what the rhyme may say,

have nothing on how hurtful the words of the tongue can be. And what makes the whole thing a lot worse is that the fire of the tongue is a chief instrument of the devil's terror regime. The Holy Spirit warns us that our sinful tongues are set on fire by hell. That means Satan wants brothers and sisters in Christ setting off verbal grenades against each other. Nothing would bring a more swift demise to a congregation and sink the ship completely.

The fire is especially dangerous when it is kindled by the tongue of a pastor who takes away the clear teaching of the Word of God and substitutes his own opinion or simply spews out meaningless garbage. Doesn't a ship run aground when it sails in shallow water? Doctrine that does not measure up to the Truth of the Bible is false doctrine, no matter how good it may sound. And when a church is burning due to falsehood proclaimed from the pulpit, the first things to be destroyed are the forgiveness of sins, the comfort of the Gospel and the certainty of heaven. In midst of the ashes arises a hideous, man-made phoenix of trust not in the Lord and what He has done, but trust in yourself. Have I done enough good? Have I made enough promises or had a clear purpose to drive my life? You might recover the Bible from all the damage, but under the influence of an evil tongue, the Bible is turned into a mere book of rules; Jesus turns from gracious Savior into the impossible example that you could never follow perfectly.

James gives us a chilling dose of reality. No one can tame the tongue. We all stumble in many ways. The winds of fad and worldly desire blow us to and fro and, by ourselves, we cannot reset the proper bearing. Our sins will cast us into the whirlpool abyss of eternal punishment. The storms we face continually threaten to capsize the entire ship. So we need our Captain, Jesus Christ, to be aboard. We need His calming word of peace for our tempest-tossed souls. His death, the shedding of His blood, and His glorious resurrection from

the dead are exactly the thing that bring the clear skies of forgiveness for our sins. You have heard this Gospel comfort from my tongue already; you will receive more words of grace from our Captain Himself before our time of worship together is complete. The galley, if you will, is set for the perfect Supper of our voyage, namely His holy Body and Blood given and shed for you.

Oftentimes passengers of a ship are "tendered" to shore for a short visit. But while they are on land, these people always keep in the back of their minds that they need to return to their ship so that the voyage may continue. I remember on the one cruise my whole family took together, we had lots of fun racing from one site to the other, but I was constantly looking at my watch so that I made sure the last tender to the ship wouldn't leave without us! We've gotta get back to the ship! Likewise, your vocation, your various callings in your life "tender" you, so to speak, to the land of this world. And as St. John reminds you, we are in this world, but not of it. Indeed, while you are on land, there are works which God prepared in advance for you to do to help one another and to help your neighbor as His holy instrument. Prayer is needed both on the ship in church and on land in your daily life and work. But the land of this world is not home for you. For your spiritual strength and sustenance, you've gotta get back to the ship, here in the nave, back to your Captain, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let the other passengers you know who don't think they need to get on board, that it would be abundantly beneficial for them to hear the Word of the Lord from the rudder-tongue who is called and ordained to proclaim that Word.

You may have been burned by the hellish fire of an evil tongue. Perhaps you have used your own tongue to devastate an entire forest of your own. The winds and currents may buffet you in your life, in your family, at work or school. A great fire of false teachings may from time to time set ablaze the Church gathered in one place

or another. Do not fear when you come across these terrible pitfalls in your voyage.

You already know from other readings in the Bible that a boat that has Jesus in it will be just fine, no matter what the storm does. That's exactly what you have here, in this nave, this ship of Christ's holy Church. Our heavenly port of call awaits! And the Captain has promised to ensure safe passage straight to the Father's waiting arms.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.