

James 3:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning continues our reading of James, “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. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a

grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.”

When I was a new pastor, maybe in my second year of ministry, I made a woman cry in Bible study. We were talking about Communion and our proper reception of it. She proceeded to say that she could take communion at any altar because it is about what she personally believes more than anything else. I explained to her that such an attitude is completely wrong and not in keeping with our theology of the Lord’s Supper. Nothing is ever just about me and Jesus, especially in the Supper. It is about me, Jesus, my neighbor, and the pastor who is being a steward of this mystery of God. We should never, ever, receive communion from a heterodox altar because what is proclaimed there is not in agreement with what we believe.

Now, my explanation of this was perhaps a bit over enthusiastic or more earnest than I realized because she

immediately got very quiet, her eyes were clearly wet, and she excused herself. Now, I'm not a heartless monster. I went out after her and we talked about it and made peace. Indeed, if that were the only instance that I could recall of shooting off my mouth, it would still be too many times. But I know full well that it isn't and many of you know that I am capable of it because you've seen me do it, much to my shame. I do hope that my wife will refrain from spontaneously standing up to give any other examples of me acting a fool by saying the exact wrong thing at the right time. Though it doesn't happen often, it seems as though it is always with devastating results when it does happen.

Truly, I know that I'm not the only pastor who has blown it occasionally. There are many stories that I've heard from people who have been deeply wounded because their pastor said something to them that was either just plain mean spirited or it

was taken wrong. And lest we think that this is something that only applies to spoken words, it doesn't. In our age of communication, it can happen in multitudinous ways. I once spoke with a woman who hung onto a letter that she had received from a pastor who told her that she should come crawling on her belly into the church building rather than walking in. Of course, that is a rather extreme example. More often, many pastors don't always realize how big of a mistake they've made until much later when the damage is often irreparable. I truly hope that if nothing else, I have proven myself to be a man who is willing to listen and if I have hurt or offended you in any way, please come and talk to me so that a mistake or my foolishness would not be enough to drive you away from this congregation or worse, from our Lord himself.

And that is a very real danger. There are many wounded people in our nation and world who live their days languishing

away from Christ because a pastor did something to hurt them.

We are seeing now the full depth of shame and damage that has existed under the surface all over the world by the sexual abuses of some clergy. The damage a pastor can inflict upon a person or a congregation can take years or even generations to recover from. This is why James begins his discussion about speaking by warning the teachers.

But let us not think that it is only pastors or teachers who are guilty of this. Raise your hand if you have never once in your life said something that hurt someone. Raise your hand if you have not said something that hurt another person this year. Indeed, none of us can say that because we all struggle from time to time with controlling our tongues. Granted, there are some who fail more than others, but it is a problem common to all people. As James says, "...no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." And this is not

something that we should glory in or find amusing. There are too many people who will carelessly wound others with what they say and then act like it isn't a problem. "Well, that's just how I am," or they say, "You know that's just how I talk."

That is no excuse for our sin! The Lord tells us in Scripture about our tongues, "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." And let's be clear that cursing doesn't mean using colorful expletives. It means actually cursing someone by saying that you desire they receive some sort of bad thing. In our day, one common curse that is often abused by people in the anonymity of the internet is telling people to kill themselves. This is a curse even though it uses no "foul language."

Truly, none of us can control our mouths like we ought to. We do not have very far to look if we want to find the truth of God's declaration that all have sinned and fall short of his glory. But there is one who did not fall short of the glory of God. In fact, he is the very glory of God made manifest among us.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the sinless one. He spent his whole life controlling his tongue and not sinning with it. But if we remember what Jesus said, that doesn't mean that he didn't have sharp words for people when needed. He even offended people sometimes. But he didn't do those things unnecessarily and he didn't dismiss it. We cannot be responsible for how other people hear everything that comes out of our mouths. But we can be, and are, responsible for what does come out of our mouths.

And what primarily came out of the mouth of Jesus was the Gospel. He called the lost sheep of Israel back into his fold. He cast out demons by his speaking. He stilled the waters and he

healed the sick. He raised the dead with but a word. And most importantly, he forgave sins with his words. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the one through whom all the world was created by the Word for he is the Word made flesh.

Truly, words are powerful. They can create connections between people and they can destroy those connections just as quickly. They can build up or they can tear down. But our words do not create reality. But the Word of Christ does just that.

Christ says things and, in his saying, makes them true. He tells the lame man to get up and walk and he does just that. He tells the dead girl to rise and she does. He says that some bread and wine are his body and his blood and they are. He says that our sins are forgiven and they are forgiven.

And we must also remember that as he hung on the cross and as he prepared to die, our Lord Jesus Christ, the only truly sinless person to have ever lived yet was crucified like a

common criminal, said, "It is finished." And it was. The act of his sacrifice of not just his body and blood but his very self and life for us was completed. He finished the work that he had been sent to accomplish. Our forgiveness is secured by the only begotten Son of God who was crucified for us and for our sins. It is finished.

And because it is finished, our sins are truly forgiven. When you hear the words that your sins are forgiven, they are! For all of the times that we have run our mouths and gotten into trouble, we are forgiven. For the times that you intentionally hurt someone with your words because you were angry, Christ has forgiven you! There is no more guilt or shame that we need to bear because it was all borne for us by Jesus at the cross. Your Lord loves you and has redeemed you from the pit of filth that is sin. And with this forgiveness, we too ought to forgive

those who have sinned against us as we pray in the Lord's prayer.

Truly, not a single one of us is capable of controlling our mouths like we ought to. May God grant that instead he helps us to uncontrollably go out into the world and share with the people we know and love the truth of the redemption that is freely given in Christ. May we not prevent others from hearing the Gospel because of our abuses of them but instead be faithful witnesses of the mercy and love of Christ that he has graciously and generously lavished upon each and every one of us. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting.

Amen.