

SERMON TITLE: "Taming the Tongue"
SERMON TEXT: James 3:1-12 (also Mark 8:27-38 and Psalm 19)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 12, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few days there have been a lot of remembrances and reflections about the 20th anniversary of 9/11. In the midst of that, I was reminded of the passage of the Patriot Act in October 2001. Within six weeks of the horrific attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, legislation was passed and signed that gave our government surveillance power to listen in to telephone calls and look at emails in order to stop any further terrorist attacks.

Over the past two decades, the Patriot Act was revised, renamed, and eventually allowed to expire. But for 19 years, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Administration didn't even need a warrant to search out communications they thought were related to terrorism. For most Americans, for quite a few years, that was no problem. The tragic events of 9/11 shook us to the core, and we were willing to sacrifice some individual liberty and privacy for the sake of our national security. We ourselves weren't speaking like terrorists, so we didn't need to worry. But, justly or unjustly, other people had to become much more careful about what they said.

The idea that someone is observing our communications and that we need to monitor our speech goes well with the scriptures we've read today. In our Call to Worship, based on Psalm 19, we heard the prayer, "Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord." In the Gospel lesson from Mark 8, in the dialog between Peter and Jesus, we heard insightful words of faith, difficult words of instruction, and painful words of rebuke. And then in James 3, we heard a discussion about the dangers posed by an uncontrolled tongue. Because such a tiny part of the body can do huge amounts of harm, James says we Christians should be about the business of taming the tongue.

1—GOOD ADVICE FOR EVERYONE

We might be tempted to think that James is only talking to a certain kind of people in this passage. After all, he does start off in verse one saying, “Not many of you should become *teachers*, my brothers and sisters.” But we can see right away that James is not writing just to Sunday School teachers or public school teachers or preachers. He’s not even just speaking to public figures like politicians and celebrities whose comments often get quoted and parsed in the news.

James is speaking to all the Christian brothers and sisters because we’re all teachers to someone. We all influence others to some degree—whether they be our students, coworkers, siblings, constituents, neighbors, friends, children, or grandchildren. Maybe James should have said, “Not many of you should become parents,” because the place where most teaching occurs is in the home. That’s the place where most of us gained our values, attitudes, and perspectives on life. That’s the place where our spirits were lifted by words of praise or disparaged by put downs and curses. That’s where life was affirmed as being happy and good, or where loud or sullen expressions of anger put family members on edge and in fear.

For sure, public speakers have to be extra careful about what we say, but anyone who opens his or her mouth or types a comment into social media is subject to James’ advice. We can be sure that there is always someone watching; there is always someone listening. There is always someone being influenced by our verbal and non-verbal communications. In the church, on the job, in the classroom, at home, on the road, at the office, in the garage, at the store, in the football stands; on Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat—wherever we go, whatever we do—taming the tongue is good advice for everyone.

2—AVOID SPARKS

Although small, the tongue can do great harm. That’s why James suggests we should avoid sparks. If our words are likely to incite a wildfire, then we should consider holding them back. Of course, the problem for most of us is that we don’t realize what harm our words will inflict until after

they've left our mouths or our fingertips. We speak without thinking. We post comments on quick impulse. We don't give ourselves time to foresee and prevent the consequences.

Maybe that's why it's good for us to observe what happens to other people when they don't watch what they say. Political figures, celebrities, and people all around us give us plenty of examples of things not to say. Maybe they thought they were speaking in a confidential setting, but their words got leaked to the media, to the office rumor mill, or into the extended family's gossip machine. How often do we later hear someone say, "I was only joking," as an attempt to smooth over their indelicate comments? Usually that excuse doesn't work because words are like a tiny spark that gets away from us and quickly turns into a raging fire.

Maybe it was because I grew up in northwestern Montana surrounded by the Kootenai National Forest, maybe it was because my grandpa worked for the U.S. Forest Service, or maybe it was just the era in which I grew up. But I remember Smokey the Bear being a major figure during my childhood. He was an action hero just as important as Superman or Spiderman. While those guys were saving the metropolis, Smokey the Bear was saving the wilderness. And we kids were taught that it was our job to help him. We were called upon to prevent forest fires.

Well, folks, James 3 is telling us that we need to prevent forest fires too. We need to avoid the sparks that flick off in gossip or anger. We need to avoid the sparks that ignite from impatience, jealousy, or lust. We need to avoid the sparks that take off in a blaze of greed or thoughtless destruction. A whole lot of trouble can be prevented if we avoid sparks by taming the tongue.

3—SPEAK ACCEPTABLE WORDS

With these warnings, it might be tempting to some of us to zip it up and never speak again. We might want to follow the advice of Proverbs 17:28—"Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue." A quote sometimes attributed to Abraham Lincoln or Mark Twain is similar: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt." But

since most of us wouldn't be able to keep silent for long, it might be more practical for us to figure out how to speak acceptable words. What kind of words and meditations would be acceptable to the Lord, our Rock and Redeemer?

Most of us, when we were kids, were taught not to speak four-letter words, at least not in polite society. If you grew up in a family like mine, your mom may have even threatened to wash your mouth out with soap a time or two. But we're all grownups now. And, if you watch any television or engage in conversation outside of the church, you've probably noticed that language has generally become a lot more coarse in recent years. Whether we like that rougher vocabulary or not, it does seem that acceptable speech has to be more than just legalistically avoiding certain four-letter words.

Words that are acceptable offer praise to God and encouragement to people. Acceptable words draw attention to the beauty of God's creation and respect all God's creatures as good. Acceptable words invite and include, rather than ignore or exclude. Acceptable words express gratitude and generosity. Acceptable words say, "Thank you," "I'm sorry," and "I love you." Acceptable words ask, "How are you, really?" and then give space for a genuine response. Acceptable words allow room for relationships and children to grow within secure boundaries.

Acceptable words are also words of truth. Sometimes that truth is hard to speak and difficult to hear, but it must be said. We see an example of this in the reading from Mark 8:31, when Jesus told his disciples that he would have to suffer and be killed. Peter didn't like hearing that one bit. But Jesus had to prepare Peter and the others for the truth of what was coming. Taming the tongue is not the same thing as avoiding discomfort and conflict at all costs. A silent tongue can be just as out of control and damaging as a loose one. To get back to the fire analogy, sometimes firefighters have to burn a fire line in order to stop a bigger conflagration.

Sometimes acceptable words also must say, "I believe in you. So do what you must, even if I don't understand." Of course, you wouldn't say that to someone you don't know very well. You'd be foolish to trust just anyone. But in those relationships most dear to us, we sometimes blow it by not

trusting more. Husbands, you may not always understand why your wife thinks she must do something, but, if you love her, maybe you'd better just say, "Yes, dear," and trust her to make the right choice. Wives, the same goes for you in reverse. Parents, when you get up in years, and your muscles and brain may not be as quick as they once were, maybe you need to trust your children to help you manage your affairs. In those most important of relationships, acceptable words are, "I love you, and I trust you to do the right thing for yourself and for me." Taming the tongue is more than silence and restraint. Taming the tongue also means speaking acceptable words.

CONCLUSION

Maybe you remember singing the children's song that goes,

Oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see;
oh, be careful, little eyes, what you see,
for the Father up above
is looking down in love.
So, be careful, little eyes, what you see.

If you remember that much, you may also remember the second verse:

Oh, be careful, little ears, what you hear;
oh, be careful, little ears, what you hear,
for the Father up above
is looking down in love.
So, be careful, little ears, what you hear.

And, if you remember those two verses, then you may also remember the third:

Oh, be careful, little tongue, what you say;
oh, be careful, little tongue, what you say,
for the Father up above
is looking down in love.
So, be careful, little tongue, what you say.*

The song may be for children, but the message of self-control is a good one for people of all ages. Every one of us should follow the good advice of taming the tongue.

*Different sources give different author names. Quotation of this song is allowed by our CCLI #21229713 & #21229720, under the author names of Karen Mitzo Hilderbrand and Kim Mitzo Thompson, c. 1999 Twin Sisters IP, LLC. A different source indicates c. 1956 Zondervan Music.