



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Double-edged tongue

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 13, 2015
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on James 3:1-12*

I found today's reading, which is a mini essay on the power of speech, both disturbing and fascinating. Disturbing because James, himself a teacher, has a particular warning for those who preach and teach in the early Christian communities: Watch out—you bear heavy responsibility for what you say and how you say it. Fascinating because this letter written almost 2,000 years ago still has the power to rattle me. It speaks to us at St. Bart's as clearly today as it did to its original hearers.

It's likely this letter began as a sermon by James, brother of Jesus, who eventually became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. So it was written before James was martyred (in the year 62), then edited and expanded by another author in the late 80's-early 90's.

James' letter is unusual in that it's not to one particular community, like to the Romans or the Corinthians. It's a general pastoral letter to a number of early Christian communities, tiny minorities within larger populations who either couldn't care less what the Christians were doing or were openly hostile to them. The writer is concerned that these early Christian groups not fall into, or fall back into, the values and behavior of their surrounding cultures.

Churches are made up of humans, then as now, so sooner or later all human behavior shows up in them. "The letter of James shows one of the church's early pastors skillfully going about his work of confronting, diagnosing, and dealing with areas of misbelief and misbehavior that had turned up in congregations committed to his care." [1]

What vivid, clear images in these short verses. The human tongue: a comparatively small part of our body, but powerful out of all proportion to its physical size. James compares our tongue to a bridle bit that, once in the horse's mouth (literally on top of the horse's tongue), can control that very large animal. Or to a rudder, again comparatively small, that can guide a large boat or ship.

Small but powerful.

If we're honest, who among us has not experienced our own tongue getting away from us? Running wild, with the bit in our teeth. Or, who among us has not been on the receiving end of that? Our own garden trampled, the neighbor's fence knocked down, someone injured—maybe us, maybe someone we love, maybe an innocent bystander.

Our tongue does get away from us—with angry words, accusations, "cussin" as we used to say, or even "a petty bit of slander." [2] All too familiar. But it goes beyond that, doesn't it? James likens our tongue to a small fire. Maybe a carelessly tossed cigarette, still burning. A campfire not quite extinguished. And then ... a raging fire, destroying a forest, hundreds or thousands of acres, the homes and lives in its path.

Small but oh so powerful.

Did you hear this verse? "For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue ..."

That verse may call to mind Genesis, and that's where James' brief essay takes us deeper. Genesis, God's creation of the world and everything that is in it - including us, made in God's own likeness.

Other species definitely have ways of communicating, but language is unique to humans. Our language—and how we use it—has the power to create, for good or for ill. Created in God's own likeness, we share God's power of creation.

[3]

With our use of language—so powerful—we can create worlds of meaning. We have the power to create distorted worlds, and we have the power to help create God’s world.

It is amazing to me that James’ words from a pre-digital, pre-social-media era are still so on target. We have words, just like in James’ time. But now we have many times more words, extended as they are by images and digital global connection—things James and his churches could never have dreamed of. Now our words have even more power. One picture used to be worth 1,000 words. Now it’s worth much more, now that it’s possible to have a thousand, even millions of followers, tweeting and re-tweeting.

Words and images are used to “shade” meaning, to seduce, to sway, to create an illusion that looks like reality. A skillful advertisement can present a certain image; it can create desire, can cause us to believe we really need that particular new phone, that brand of shoes or shirt, an apartment in that building/neighborhood, to fly on that particular airline.

Think of how images (in words or photos) are used to create and present a certain view of a person or situation. In this pre-election season, our cup runneth over with such uses. That is all I’m going to say about that. I am biting my tongue. We see this happen not just in national and local politics, or even office politics. It’s in our news every day.

But there is another side.

Words and images can also bring truth to us, can make us aware of the realities of our world and challenge us to participate in creating God’s world.

Our Bishop of New York, the Rt. Rev. Andy Dietsche, whom many of you know from his visits with us here at St. Bart’s, sent a letter on Friday asking the people of this Diocese to explore how we can respond to the current refugee crisis. Among his words were these:

The stories of suffering and unwelcome, of despair and violence, and of hope in the face of all odds have captivated the attention and awakened the compassion of all people. The now-iconic photograph of the three-year old boy drowned on the Turkish beach has broken the hearts of all. He has become not only the visible sign of the despair of this refugee multitude, but to my eyes he is also a representative for all of the lost and forgotten, suffering and dying children across the globe, most of whose pictures we will never see. [4]

Bishop Dietsche recently sent another letter, too, calling the churches of this Diocese to awareness and action on racism. In this letter, which Edward referenced in his sermon last week, Bishop Dietsche reminded us:

This Sunday, September 13, is the closest Sunday to the anniversary of the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 [in which 4 young black girls were killed.] ... After this year of violence and witness, it must be said: racial injustice is not a black issue. It is an American issue. It is a Christian issue. It is an Episcopal Church issue.

Powerful words.

At this time in the life of St. Bart’s, we are engaged in a search for our next rector. St. Bart’s Search Committee and Canon Deb Tammearu made a presentation at this morning’s Forum on their work to date and what’s coming next. Our Search Committee has worked faithfully through this summer. A large part of their work is listening to the people of this parish. James says earlier in his letter (1:19), “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

Our Search Committee has been listening and will continue to listen. We need to listen to each other, not just during the rector search, but every day. After they have listened carefully, our Search Committee will combine all they have heard into what’s called a Parish Profile—a written description of St. Bart’s: who we are, who we believe God is calling us to be in this next period of our history, what we are looking for in our next rector.

This is hugely important work they are doing on behalf of all of us. I ask your prayers for our Search Committee and their continuing, faithful work, that they will continue to exercise their power of words and images with care and love.

Pray for our Search Committee. Pray for this community of St. Bart’s, as we continue our witness to God’s love at this crossroads, and as we find new ways of striving for justice and peace.

May each of us, and all of us collectively, use our power of speech and images to join in creating God’s world.

For it is God's world—where each person can have enough, where the dignity of every human being is respected, where each person is known to be created and loved by God, loved more than we can ask or imagine.

May we use our power to create God's world. Amen.

[1] *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language*, by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, c 1993, p. 563.

[2] *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol XII: The Letter of James*, by Luke Timothy Johnson. Abingdon Press, 1998, pp 205-206.

[3] Ibid.

[4] http://dioceseny.org/news_items/303-bishop-writes-on-refugee-crisis

[5] http://dioceseny.org/news_items/302-bp-dietsche-issues-call-to-racial-reconciliation-and-justice

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