

September 13, 2009
The Federated Church of Hyannis
Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

TONGUES ON FIRE

James 3:1-12

Gracious Savior, you have the words of eternal life. As the Scripture is read and preached in this hour, empower us to hear it with humility and openness, so that hearing it, we may respond with courage and conviction. Amen.

A young man was on his first day working in the produce department of the local supermarket. A lady came up to him and said she wanted to buy half of a head of lettuce. He said they only sold whole heads of lettuce or packages of shredded lettuce, but she persisted in asking for a half a head of lettuce. Finally he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager."

He went to the back of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old hag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned about and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?" Relieved, the manager said, "That would be fine."

Later he congratulated the boy on his quick thinking and asked, "Where are you from, son?" The boy said, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager replied, "My wife is from Toronto" to which the boy replied, "Oh, what team did she play for?" The tongue is forever getting us into trouble.

When I play golf I do not usually tell people I am a minister until later in the round, if at all. Some golfers find it difficult to play without the use of profanity. They miss hitting the ball and then use certain expletives. When they discover there is a minister present they often apologize for the language. One preacher responds to such moments by saying, "That's okay, if I thought saying such words would help my game, I would use them as well." Taming the tongue is not easy.

The illustrations James used involve the two major forms of transportation in the first century: horses and boats. In our language we might say, “The steering wheel weighs only ounces but controls a two ton truck.” “A two pound bird can bring down a 10 ton jet.” And so many words carelessly spoken cause so much harm to the people to whom they are directed.

We can take the edge off what we say if we do not call it gossip. It is “the speedy transmission of near-factual information.” In some cases it might be referred to as a speaking surplus disorder. We can easily justify what we say as self-defense. When we feel powerless our tongue can make us feel powerful. Sometimes those lacking physical ability make up for it by being a verbal bully. There is the expression “tongue lashing.” Some of us have given them; most of us have gotten them. I am going to suggest that is not the God-given reason for a tongue – to lash other people.

We need to be cautious about how words affect one another in church. There is a country church in a small village in Croatia. One day near the beginning of the 20th century, an altar boy named Josip Broz served the priest at Sunday Mass. The boy accidentally dropped the glass cruet of wine. It smashed to pieces. The village priest struck the altar boy sharply on the cheek and in a gruff voice shouted: “Leave the altar and don’t come back.” He never did come back to the Church. That boy became Tito, the Communist leader of Yugoslavia after World War II.

About the same time an altar boy named Peter John served at Mass in St. Mary’s Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois. This altar boy, too, dropped the wine cruet. In later life, that boy wrote: “There is no atomic explosion that can equal in intensity of decibels the noise and explosive force of a wine cruet falling on the marble floor of a cathedral in the presence of a bishop. I was frightened to death.”

The celebrant at Mass that morning was Bishop John Spalding. With a warm twinkle in his eye, the bishop gently whispered: “Someday you will be just what I am.” That boy grew up to become Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. During the 1950s, he became widely known for his Tuesday evenings in a series of programs called, “Life is Worth Living.”

We need to be cautious about how words affect our church life, dividing and destroying or healing and uniting. It has been popular in the past few decades for denominational bodies to pass resolutions. I am opposed to

every resolution I have ever been asked to vote on – even the ones with which I agree. And the reason is that the words of resolutions divide. Words of a resolution are read and are debated with the use of yet more words. As soon as that vote is taken the words divide a group of people. Some are victors and some are the vanquished. Most feel the pride of being in the majority, but every time a vote is taken these words cause a group of people to be marginalized.

I believe that part of the decline of major Christian denominations in America can be traced to votes taken by church bodies or pronouncements made by church authorities. Words have divided us as a church. They have started many a fire. But, as this letter reminds us, that is not what words are for – not for those who follow Jesus. Our words are to give praise to God and unity to God's people.

I suspect that most of us carry painful memories of words spoken at home. That peculiar American icon Rosanne Barr once said, "We spend the first 18 years of our life at home and the rest of our life getting over it." There is too much truth in that. A young lady and her mother had a violent shouting match about the dent she put in her mother's car. After the confrontation, the father tried to console her. "What did your mother say about the dent in the car?" he asked. "Dad, do you want me to leave out the swear words?" "Please," he replied. She said, "Then she didn't say anything."

As children we hear words the way the words are expressed. Our clearest memories are often of the harshest words spoken to us. Thinking back, the nearest I recall to positive words spoken by my father are him saying things like, "You are not as stupid as we thought," perhaps a joking affirmation but received as a dismissive insult. Thinking back to our childhood I suspect that for too many of us the most enduring memories are of words that are cruel, not words that are kind.

Words are forever causing trouble in our personal relationships. One schoolteacher sends this note to all parents on the first day of school which reads: "If you promise not to believe everything your child says happens at school, I'll promise not to believe everything your child says happens at home." But aren't we inclined to believe the worst? It is so much more fun to believe the worst than to believe the best. Sometimes rumors get spread just because they are so much fun to spread and the truth becomes unimportant.

Perhaps you remember Picabo Street, the Olympic gold medal skier. It is reported that she is more than a famous skier. In fact, between training on the slopes and traveling around the world to compete, she managed to get an education and earn a degree in nursing. Early in her nursing career, she was assigned briefly to work as an ICU nurse in a large metropolitan hospital.

She did outstanding work. But there was a problem. The head of nursing had to tell her not to answer the phone in ICU because of the confusion it caused when callers would be connected to ICU and hear Picabo pick up and say in her best professional voice: "Picabo, ICU." It is not a true story. She is not a nurse, has never been a nurse, and doesn't particularly want to be a nurse, but the story has been told again and again as though it was, just because it is a good story to tell.

These words of James inform not just our spiritual life but our secular society. And can't you just tell when it is Sweeps Week? That is the time special attention is given to the number of viewers who watch each TV program and from that rating TV stations can bill advertisers. There are the teaser lines like, "Politician caught red handed. Details at 7." "Things in your home causing you to gain weight. More on news at 9." "High paying jobs that cause weight loss, report at 11."

I will never vote for someone who says, "My opponent has a secret plan to..." If it is a secret plan how do you know about it?" I will never vote for someone who says, "My opponent's plan will raise your taxes and lower benefits. My plan will lower your taxes and raise your benefits." Unless you believe they have pixie dust to sprinkle on our problems to make them better, don't believe it no matter who says it.

I believe that President George Bush – the first one – was right when he said that we need a kinder, gentler America. The headlines and the talk shows get more and more shrill and divisive. People are constantly attacking and attacking and attacking. The internet has only made it worse. Anyone can have a blog. Truth becomes the casualty of opinion. Civility is unimportant. Tongue lashing is the style of discourse. Jesus' command to love our enemies is simply ignored.

I have a hope that some day these talking heads and typing fingers stand up – I am presuming they all have legs – and turn off their microphones and

switch off their computers and step out into the light and raise their hands to help someone instead of just attacking opponents. Instead of trying to place the blame on someone else, go and help rake the back yard of an elderly widow who has no other help.

Instead of making a political statement, drive a wounded vet to a doctor's appointment and just sit there and listen to him talk without expressing an opinion. Instead of speaking from ignorance about the economy, pick up a brush and paint a room for a family where mom and dad both work a job and a half to make ends meet while trying their best to care for their kids. Unfortunately it is not likely to happen because most of us think that gossip is what other people do. I am just expressing my opinion. I am just sharing my feelings. I am just telling you what I think. I am just saying this because I care so much.

Over the years of my ministry I have had people who have confessed to me all kinds of things including robbery, sexual assault and even murder. But I do not recall anyone ever confessing to gossip, even while it is the most common of human failings. It is why whenever we say anything about anyone we need to remember we are speaking about someone created in the likeness and image of God. Whatever we say about another human being we are saying about one for whom Christ died.

The caution is not simply to make sure we phrase things well, but that we use speech that is consistent with the message of good news that Jesus brought. Before we share anything with anyone about someone else we should do our best to honestly ask our self, "Is what I'm about to say coming from a desire to share God's love, or am I simply trying to feed my own ego by putting down someone else?"

Our words should fundamentally be words of love and mercy and grace. Charles Wesley had the right idea about how we are to use our tongues when he wrote:

"O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise
The glories of my God and King
The triumphs of His Grace."

This lesson is about the importance of what we say. They are words of warning. What we say can give life or destroy life. The eloquence of our

words bears no relationship with the truth of our words. We need to stop and to reflect on what we say, whether it for good or for ill, whether it will tear down or build up, whether we might actually be speaking Satan's words of hate and evil and destruction or if we are truly speaking Jesus' words of grace, mercy and love.