

Watch what you say

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“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

- Psalm 19:14

Those words from our psalm today are often used by preachers as a prayer
before they begin their sermon.

This line from Psalm 19 is quite appropriately paired with our reading from
James today, since one of the themes of the letter of James could be
summarized as, “Watch what you say.” James reminds us that one of the
ways we show our faith in our actions is by controlling our tongues.

In the first chapter of the letter, the author opens the subject with these
words of guidance:

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow
angry.” (1:19)

“If those who claim devotion to God don’t control what they say, they
mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless.” (1:26)

That translation is from the Common English Bible, a new translation
published in 2012. I chose to use this translation for our reading from James
today because I think it has a way of putting things very succinctly and
directly, and it’s helpful sometimes to hear familiar words in a new way. In
our passage from today, we heard:

“...even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly.
Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is
a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire
lives.” (3:5-6)

“With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in
God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My
brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!” (3:9-10)

And finally, in chapter 4, James wraps up this theme by saying:

“Brothers and sisters, don’t say evil things about each other. Whoever insults or criticizes a brother or sister insults and criticizes the Law. If you find fault with the Law, you are not a doer of the Law but a judge over it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, and he is able to save and to destroy. But you who judge your neighbor, who are you?” (4:11-12)

James reminds us that words matter. Words matter, and words can be dangerous, causing incredible harm.

Many of us grew up with the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But James reminds us that that is just not true.

Words may not be able to scratch us or break our bones, but we all know that words can, in fact, hurt us. How many of you can remember someone saying something to you that just cut you to the core, something that still is painful for you to think about? That pain often lingers long past the length of time it would take for a scratch or a broken bone to heal, because emotional pain is so incredibly damaging.

The way we use our words, how we speak to one another, is a serious spiritual matter. The tongue is a reflection of our souls. In several places in the Gospels, Jesus teaches that we will “know them by their fruits” – that we should look at what is outwardly produced to determine what is inside a person. In the same way that we know a tree is a fig tree if figs are growing on it, if negative, demeaning speech is coming out of a person, we know that their insides are similarly corrupted. “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks,” Jesus says (Luke 6:45).

I would venture to say that this is true at a community level as much as it is at an individual level. So what does it say about this congregation if a common characteristic of our speaking to one another is to cut one another off, dismiss each other’s perspectives, and to speak negatively about each other?

When I asked you to name some of this congregation’s weaknesses in a sermon a few months ago, someone said something like, “When we get into

conflict with each other, all our talk about love and reconciliation goes out the window and we don't treat each other well.”

Now, none of us is perfect in practicing love and reconciliation, but what this person was pointing to was more than a run-of-the-mill observation that we fall short of our ideals. They were pointing to a pattern in our ways of relating to one another in this congregation that is cause for serious concern. Since I have been here, I have either directly witnessed or been told stories about:

- Someone telling someone else to “shut up” in the middle of a Christian formation class
- People referring to some of their fellow parishioners as “evil”
- People standing up in the middle of a church service to air their grievances about things going on at church
- People literally yelling at one another in a disagreement over a matter of church governance
- People talking about other people behind their backs, and writing people off based on previous behavior – “oh, that’s the way so-and-so is.”
- People selectively enforcing church laws in order to exclude someone from a leadership position

Some of these things happened since I have been here, some of them happened before my time. But all of them concern me deeply. Because if we cannot treat one another better than that, then all the prayer and worship and service in the world isn't going to get us anywhere. As James says, “If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless.” (1:26)

When we aren't more careful with our words, when we use our words as weapons, we compromise our witness. This congregation lives our faith in amazing ways – we give generously to outreach programs at home and abroad, we feed and shelter people experiencing homelessness in our sanctuary, we sing beautifully, we offer heartfelt praise to God every week in worship. But while all of those things would attract someone to want to be part of this community, the minute they get snapped at in a parish-wide forum, I guarantee you they will think twice about ever coming back.

“Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!” (3:9-10)

Maybe one of the reasons I am so sensitive to this issue is that it is something I struggle with myself. Although I do a fairly good job of controlling my tongue at church, a few of you have seen me slip up, and you know that the snarky contemptuousness that I’m calling out today is alive and well in my own heart. I know first-hand the ways in which an attitude of disrespect and contempt can eat away at relationships. So let me be clear that this is not a “holier than thou” kind of critique. It’s a call of distress from someone who’s in danger of going down with the ship.

As we embark upon this Year of Discernment as a parish, I implore you to make a concerted effort to heed James’s advice: Watch what you say. Let’s be quick to listen and slow to speak. Let’s not allow blessing and cursing to come from the same mouth. Let’s remember the power of our words, and use them wisely.