Sunday, June 11, 1989
ALL ABOUT THE MOUTH
Matthew 5:33-37, 12:33-37; James 3:6-10

In recent years, we've heard a lot about "body language," the concept that the way we hold our bodies, the way we walk, the way we stand, the way we fold our arms or not fold our arms, how we use our hands or do not use them, the look in our eyes, whether or not we blush, and much more, all indicate what we are feeling or thinking as much as the words we may be saying.

I remember vividly an individual who was giving a speech on love, and how and why we should love. However, the mannerisms of his body and face that went along with his words gave other signals. His body was talking of hate while his words were about love.

So it is that our body language, and particularly the expression on our faces, can often tell others our deepest feelings. We can express fear, joy, sadness, delight, ignorance, knowledge, and many other feelings and emotions just by the look on our faces. You can even tell whether or not a person is lying or telling the truth by facial expressions. The Bible has a lot to say about body language. And in the last several sermons, I've been talking about parts of our bodies which reveal a great deal about each one of us.

Two weeks ago, the sermon was entitled "All About Hands," and I noted that you can tell a great deal about yourself and others by looking at a person's hands and what we and others do with our hands. We can wring our hands in worry and anxiety; we can fold our hands in apathy; we can put our hands in our pockets and not reach out to help or to ask for help; or we can be hand-droppers, good starters but poor finishers. Followers of Jesus, however, are "hands-on" people. We reach out to join hands with others to solve problems, to be of help to people. We lay our hands onto a task. What we do with our hands has a lot to say about the kind of people we are.

Then last week, the sermon was entitled "What Makes You Blush?" We human beings normally blush when we are embarrassed or have a sense of shame about something. Jeremiah, one of the greatest of the prophets included in the Old Testament of the Bible, said about the people of his time, "They did not know how to blush," that is, they had lost their sense of shame and were no longer embarrassed about the greed and the unethical practices of their time. Blushing is a part of our body language that reveals how sensitive we are — how human we are.

Today in this sermon, I am talking about another part of our body — the mouth. The mouth is an integral part of the face. You can look at a person's face or your own face in the mirror, and it will tell you quite a bit about someone else or about yourself. For example, the lines on a person's face often give an indication as to whether one smiles a lot and is basically a happy person or frowns a lot and is unhappy and angry most of the time.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about one part of our face especially, and what it expresses, and that is the mouth. Your mouth can smile or frown, and we all know how contagious either one can be, but a genuine smile is particularly so. Such clichés as "Smile and the whole world smiles with you," tell us how important our smiles are. Think how hard we work to get a baby to smile.

So we need to be aware of what we are doing with our mouths. I find, for example, that often just the act of physically causing myself to smile will begin to change my mood for the better. A smile affects our mood, our spirit, and also the mood and spirit of others around us.

I remember learning the song as a child—"It isn't any trouble just to s-m-i-l-e." Another song we learned was—"Pack up your troubles in an old kit bag and smile, smile, smile."

I'm sure that Jesus smiled and laughed frequently, especially as he told some of the parables. At one point in his ministry, he severely criticized the religious people of his day who were always looking so dismal and glum while they practiced their religion. He was saying, "Smile more. If your religion is something painful all the time, then it's the wrong kind of religion."

So the first point of this sermon about your mouth is — use your mouth to smile and to laugh as much as possible.

Secondly, according to the Bible, you are to watch your mouth very carefully so that the words that come out of it are those which bring help and healing, instead of those which cause evil and destruction.

We all remember the childhood saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Deep down, we know that saying is not true. The wrong kind of words can and do hurt us very much, and the right kind of words can be healing. Words can sting us or reassure us.

Jesus knew this, and that's why, in a number of places in the Bible, he reminds us that we will have to render account for every careless word we utter, for by our words we are justified and by our words we will be condemned. That's not only a warning for politicians, but for all of us. Think of the careless words that are spoken all the time by all of us. Gossip is an especially insidious form of careless words.

And the problem is that once words are spoken, they live on to kill or betray or to heal and to help. A word that has been spoken cannot be called back. More and more, we live in a time of careless words. They have a spreading effect the same as a pebble makes ripples when thrown in a pond. We've all said words that we wish we could've reached out and grabbed and put back in our mouths and swallowed, but it has been too late.

A folk tale tells of a boy who was talking unkindly about other people. His father had him take a bag of goose feathers and fling them out of a second-story window. The wind swirled them into the streets and alleys. Then the father said to his son, "That is the way your words go out into the world. Now go out and pick up all the goose feathers." The boy cried, "That's impossible." "So it is also impossible to take back the words you have spoken," said his father.

Maybe we all ought to imagine that we are all the time speaking into a big tape recorder and that our words will be played back to us. Then we would more carefully watch our mouths and what they say. There would be fewer careless words.

Two weeks ago, I talked about the importance of laying our hands to a constructive task. One thing all of us can do that's constructive is to watch our mouths, especially watch the words that we form with our vocal cords, tongues, and lips. There are times when it would be better for us to put our hands over our mouths before we put our foot in our mouths.

One sure way that each one of us can begin a new spiritual and healing life is by the proper use of our mouths, by our speech, our words. Every idle and careless word we speak hurts others and ourselves. There are very few neutral words. Most of them are either hurting or healing. Thus, the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament of the Bible says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” (Proverbs 25:11)

When Jesus was on trial before his crucifixion, the Apostle Peter was confronted in the courtyard outside the trial by a woman who said, “Your speech betrays you; surely you are one of his followers.” Peter swore, “I don’t even know the man.” The expletive is deleted. But the woman insisted—"Your speech gives you away.”

Our speech does often give us away; it betrays us. It tells more about us than we might want known.

But words rightly used can heal. The right kind of words can give evidence that we are loving, caring people. People who meet us every day in our work or in our leisure or wherever else should be able to recognize us as gentle, loving Christian persons because of the quality of our speech, because our mouths do not utter careless words, because we watch our mouths.

Thirdly, Jesus reminds us that we are to watch our mouths so that our words are honest and easily understood.
There is a peculiar saying that goes, “Don’t mind the rhetoric.” By that is usually meant—"Don’t pay too much attention to the words of the speaker.” He or she is only speaking for effect, for an impression, and is not to be totally believed. This is a devastating practice. We are rather to be held accountable for every word we say.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You have heard that it is said of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, ‘Do not swear at all... Let what you say be simply, yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.'”

Jesus was saying that an excess of words, or by saying, “I swear this is so,” should be unnecessary. A simple “Yes” or “No” should be all that’s needed. Your words should be true and good whether or not you are under oath to tell the truth. Saying that you swear on the Bible, or by God, or by your Scout’s honor, or cross your heart and hope to die, doesn’t make what you say any more the truth than a simple yes or no.

Most of us remember a time when in many business transactions there were few written contracts — a person would say, “I’m going to do this or that,” and the other person would agree, and they would shake hands and the contract was made. They were as good as their word.

And one more point Jesus makes about the use of our mouth and the words which come out, and that is to be sensitive to when to keep silent and when to speak. In our day-to-day relationships with each other, it’s so easy for us to speak too soon and say too much.
As I look back, I’m sure that as a parent, as my children were growing up, I frequently spoke too soon, that is, had quick advice to give, and then too much advice as well. Most of the time, children are not asking for advice when they talk to us and tell us things, but are asking for understanding.

Recently I came across this suggestion about when to speak and when to keep silent in our human relationships. Before you speak, ask yourself: (1) Do I really have something helpful to

say? (2) Does anyone wish to hear it? (3) Is this the right time to say it? If the answer to even one of these three questions is “No,” keep silent. The point of this exercise is to combat the self-centered habit of inflicting stories, opinions, or advice on people who often aren’t interested in hearing them.

“But people are usually interested in what I have to say,” you might argue. I can only suggest that the next time you find yourself relating some incident that seems to you interesting or important, you excuse yourself to go to the bathroom before coming to the point. Then when you return, keep silent and see whether anyone asks you to pick up where you left off. (Don’t be angry if no one does.)

In this sermon, I have made four points about the human mouth, yours and mine:

One of the most enchanting and helpful uses of your mouth is to smile. It will help you and others as well.
Through your mouth, God has also given you the beautiful gift of human speech. And that leads to the second point —

Words can be healing or damaging. Beware of uttering careless words.

Jesus also reminds us to watch our mouths so that our words are honest. We are to be as good as our word.

Be sensitive about when to speak and when to keep silent. Sometimes silence is golden.

Watch your mouth. Maybe we need to smile more and talk less. Amen.