Sunday, September 17, 2000
TAMING THE TONGUE
James 3:1-12

The letter of James in the New Testament is a relatively short document, and it is filled with plenty of practical advice for those of us who are attempting to continue to grow and mature in our spiritual journeys. The passage read earlier is a good example. Its subject is "taming the tongue." It's the other side of last week's sermon on "Hearing Deficit Disorder." In taming the tongue, the Bible is not talking about a deficit but rather a surplus or an excess. You can speak too quickly without thinking about the consequences. Maybe this sermon should be entitled, "Speech Carelessness Disorder," or "Speech Surplus Disorder," because there are times when we say much more than is necessary.

Bobby Knight, the recently fired basketball coach at the University of Indiana, is a good example of an individual who has not learned to tame his tongue or his temper. Mr. Knight is considered by many to be one of the smartest basketball coaches. But as one person said, "If you're so smart, why do you keep doing dumb things?"

The ancient folk tale which I've used in previous sermons fits here. A young boy had a bad habit of speaking thoughtlessly. One day his father had him take a bag of goose feathers and throw 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 those goose feathers." The boy said, "That's impossible." "So it is," said his father. "In the same way, it is impossible to take back the words you have spoken."

Recently, during one of his campaign stops, Governor George W. Bush said some unflattering words about a reporter, assuming the microphone was turned off. But it was not. We've all made that mistake. We've said things to another person, only to find out later that someone else also heard it. The question we always need to ask ourselves is: even if no one else overheard the unkind comment we made, did our saying it do anyone any good?

Sometimes when I'm playing golf with others, someone will hit the ball where he didn't want it to go and then use some expletives he wouldn't want to see in print. Because he's in a group where a minister is present, he will quickly apologize to me. My usual response is: "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 writer of James says, "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 — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it, we bless the Lord and Father, and with it, we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, it ought not to be this way."

The letter of James in the Bible is not the only place we are warned about the words we say. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are told, "There is a time to speak and a time to be silent." In one of his teachings, Jesus said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment, you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter." And in another place, Jesus said, "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

The Hippocratic Oath, which all physicians swear to uphold, begins, "First, do no harm." There are times when I'm shaving, driving, or mowing the lawn, and I will remember a harsh thing I've

said which has wounded another person. They were careless words. Sometimes I said them because I wasn't thinking. If I had been thinking, I would not have said them.

You probably remember the childhood saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." This is not totally accurate. Words can hurt very much, and the right words can be healing. Careless words can sting or damage a relationship. The right words, spoken at the right time, can help build or restore a relationship. Some of the most healing words in every language are: "I'm sorry, please forgive me." And then the response, "I forgive you." In the book of Proverbs, we are told, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." (Proverbs 25:11)

The power of the tongue, the ability of human speech to move people, to inspire, to challenge, is unequaled, as is its power to maim, to hurt, to bring shame, to wound another person. You've been there. In proportion to the body, the tongue is a small part, but it has enormous power. It can help oppressed people, subdue resistance with a song. It can also cause people to spend their money on the lottery or encourage a person to give in to a temptation that will hurt them, or words can cause a crowd to riot or do other evil acts.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech was a positive rallying point in the Civil Rights Movement. Winston Churchill used the power of speech, the eloquence of his tongue, to inspire the British to resist Hitler. Hitler, on the other hand, used the power of his tongue to ignite the Holocaust and other massive evils. Do not underestimate the power of the tongue for good or for evil.

It's important to be careful what you say in the presence of others, to learn what not to say and when to say it.

And yet — though you can learn what to say and what not to say, that doesn't in itself change your thoughts. You have to go deeper than that. It's not easy to change the way you think. You've been formed from early childhood by experience, including the fear and loathing you heard in your parents' voices, the prejudices they expressed. You've learned from your peers and others. You've been shaped by your own fears and anxieties, often rooted in the fear of strangers or someone who seems to be totally different from you.

You've learned from infancy the psychology of self-defense, or maybe it is born in you. Sometimes it seems as though the infant is born into the world already ready to say with their first words, "I didn't do it." "She hit me first." "It's not my fault." Do you learn that? Or does it come naturally to us, bred in the genes?

You and I can learn to swallow the mean thoughts and not speak them out loud. We can keep a lid on the reflex of blaming or belittling another person. But it's more difficult to erase the impulse to do it. And yet, I believe that not saying the words, not giving the thought speech, is the first step toward taming those impulses. Giving voice to an evil thought bestows upon it an expanded power. In the same way as saying good words can have some effect on our inward thinking, saying bad words can do the same. It's related to what I called in another sermon, "the power of positive acting." If you act the way you want to be, that has some power in making you into that kind of person you become, and speaking is a part of that action.

You can also be saying one thing with your tongue, and your body can be saying something quite the opposite.

I remember seeing and hearing a person give a speech on love and on how and why we are to love. However, the mannerisms of his body and face and other visible body language gave quite a different message. His eyes, the way in which he said the words, and other body language made it clear that he was speaking of hate while his mouth spoke the words of love.

So the first point in taming the tongue, according to our faith, is to pay attention to what you are saying and to be sure that what you are saying with your words coincides with the feeling inside of you. And if the feeling is to cause someone harm or put someone down or is disrespectful in any way, don't say it. If it involves another person, it is better to go and try to repair the relationship. Jesus said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24). In other words, work to be consistent so that what you are doing on the outside corresponds to what's going on inside. 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.

It's no wonder the Bible emphasizes taming the tongue. Now I want to expand the metaphor because I believe it will help us further in understanding how to tame our tongues so that we can live up to the image of God in which we are created.

In the same way that the tongue would be nothing without the thoughts that are deep inside of us which hope to find a voice, so also the tongue is nothing without the mouth. The human mouth, with your lips and tongue, is what provides the opportunity to form words and give them clarity.

The mouth is an integral part of the human 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 yourself. For example, the lines on a person's face often give an indication as to whether one smiles a lot and is generally a happy person or frowns more and is generally unhappy and angry. We all know how important our smiles are. Ever notice how hard we work to try to get a baby to smile?

What you do with your tongue and your mouth can have an effect on you as well as on others. I find, for example, that just the act of physically causing myself to smile will begin to change my mood for the better. A smile affects your mood and your spirit and also the mood and spirit of those around you.

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

When you're smiling and happy, it helps tame your tongue and even goes deeper than that to make you feel good from the inside out. Smiling and laughter are healing forces, as much research has indicated.

I'm convinced that Jesus smiled and laughed frequently, especially as he told some of his parables. At one point in his ministry, he severely criticized the overly religious people of his day who were always looking so dismal and glum while they practiced their religion. He was saying, "Smile more. Laugh more. If your religion is making you miserable all the time, then it's the wrong kind of religion." Your contact with the Holy, with the Sacred in life, should bring joy and give your spirit a lift.

So the second point in taming the tongue is to find things that cause you to smile and laugh.

In the third place, pay attention to your words so that what your tongue is saying is easily understood. There is a strange saying that goes, “Don’t mind the rhetoric.” What is usually meant with that comment is: don’t pay too much attention to the words of the speaker because he or she is only speaking for effect, to make an impression, and is not to be taken seriously. To the contrary, according to our faith, we are to be held accountable for the words we say.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those 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.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

He was reminding his listeners that using an excess of words, or by saying, “I swear this is so,” should be unnecessary. A simple yes or no is all that’s needed. Your words should be true and good whether or not you are under oath to tell the truth. Swearing by your scout’s honor or crossing your heart and hoping to die doesn’t make what you say any more the truth than a simple yes or no. Again, it’s a matter of taming the tongue.

Pay attention to your tongue. The words you say can hurt or heal. It is at the center of our faith that “the Word became flesh and lived among us,” meaning God’s love is most often experienced in our day-to-day relationships with each other. When you give voice to a thought or a feeling inside of you and form it into words that are spoken out loud, the word becomes flesh, and if it is a good word, it sows good seed, and if the word is evil, it has destructive powers. The gift of human speech is profound.

Mind your tongue and your mouth. Perhaps we need to smile more and say less. Amen.