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. It's 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,

say too much and do all of this without thinking of 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

saying unkind words about and to other people. 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 in one of his campaign stops, Governor George W. Bush, said some unflattering words about a reporter and assumed the microphone was turned off.. But it was not. We've all made that mistake. We've said things to another person that

we assumed was a private comment, only to learn 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 will use some expletives he wouldn't want to see in print, and because he's in the group where a minister is present 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 the

letter of James uses this analogy. "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--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 can 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 let 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, or driving, or mowing the lawn, 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 stone may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." This is not totally accurate.

The wrong kind of words can hurt another person or you 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 thing. Yet it can move a legislature, rally an 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 that individual 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 under-estimate the power of the tongue for good or for evil.

It is possible to learn to tame the tongue, to be careful what you say in the presence of others, to learn what not to say and what 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, experience that includes the fear and loathing you heard in your parent's 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 all ready to say with her or his 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 in ridding ourselves of those inside hurtful 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 mouth 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 in the

Sermon on the Mount, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leaver your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." 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 mouth before we put our foot in our mouth.

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 you can live up to the image of God in which you

and I are created.

In the same way as 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 your tongue are what provide 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 quite a happy person or frowns more and is unhappy and angry most of the time. We all

know how contagious a smile or a frown can be. Such cliches as "Smile and the world smiles with you," tell us 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 a 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 effects your mood and your spirit and also the mood and spirit of those around you.

I remember learning the song as a child, "It's 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."

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 where always looking so dismal and glum while they practiced their religion. He was saying, "Smile more. Laugh more. If your religion is something

painful

all the time, then it's the wrong kind of religion."

You 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 totally

believed. This is a devastating practice. Quite 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 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."

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.

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. 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 lives 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 sows good seed and if the word is evil it has destructive powers.. The gift of human speech is

one of God's most glorious gifts when used in the right way.

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