

## 8/22/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

God of the implanted Word and God of silence,

This morning we offer our hearts in prayer to you. We praise you for this marvelous, beautiful, complex, and perplexing world you have created through Christ the Word.

We praise you as well for the Word made flesh. For sending Jesus who lived out unity with You and perfectly reflected your love that submits to death and outlives death.

We confess that we often struggle to use our words well. Sometimes we hurt others with gossip. Other times, we find sympathetic ears to release our frustrations, but do not approach the person with whom we have a concern. We fail to find the words that build up, that foster community, and heal rifts.

We fail to listen well to the words of others, distracted instead by the need to generate our own words to focus attention on ourselves, to win an argument, or to control others. Even within our private, unspoken thoughts, we sometimes fall into toxic thinking – inaudible words that poison and distort our sight.

Forgive us, O God. Purify us with your light and love.

Help us to discover the silence in which we can know your naked love. Help us to submit all of our words to the Word who became flesh. Open our hearts to receiving the wisdom of James as pastor Lois preaches today.

Believing in your faithfulness to hear our prayers, we bring prayers for our community and world.

We pray for Roger and Fern Bartel and their family in their good-bye to Roger's mother Linda.

We continue to pray for Robyn, Ethan, Aida and Riley after the devastating fire that has destroyed their home. We thank you for the support that they have found in this community and for the house in which they are able to stay. Be with them as the children attend school, as they navigate day-to-day details, as they process the loss of what cannot be replaced, and as they rebuild their lives.

We continue to remember Marlo and Lynette with the decisions they have after their fire.

We pray for safe travel for Dave Neff as he drives the new bus that's outside to the Peace Academic Center in Arizona. We pray for students, families, teachers, and administrators as they begin the new year at the school.

We pray for Brooke Nafziger as she begins her work at Escuela del Sol Montessori school. Work through the connections she develops with students and teachers at the school.

We pray for Goessel and other local schools in these first weeks of classes as school staff do their best to proceed with precautions to avoid Covid outbreaks. Give wisdom and positive energy.

We pray for those in our congregation dealing with health concerns. For those who continue to adjust to a new home after moving into skilled nursing care.

We pray for Bethesda and for other area homes as they make decisions in response to the ever-changing Covid situation, and balance morale with avoiding infections.

We also speak prayers for our world that groans with suffering and pain.

We pray for our local area and communities around the country facing a surge in hospitalizations that continue to take an emotional and physical toll on health care workers.

We pray for the people of Haiti as they struggle with the loss of life of a destructive earthquake following major political upheaval.

We pray for the people in Afghanistan as experience the anxiety, chaos, and fear. In a region of the world plagued with longstanding violence, we pray for peace, for a way to be open to transforming hearts to allow for human flourishing.

We are always allowed to dream because the resurrection to life of Jesus gives us that permission. Inspire us with your Word through our worship service this morning. Be in our dreaming, our speaking, our hoping, and our acting.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION  
(based on VT 1023)

Dear God,

Today in your presence we offer the body of Christ what we have and who we are.

We bring gifts of words and gifts of silence.

Gifts of faith and gifts of questions.

Gifts of the head and gifts of the heart.

Gifts of careful planning, and gifts of spontaneity.

Gifts of money and gifts of time.

Receive what we have and all that we are.

Strengthen the body of Christ and make us ever to be a new people in your image. Amen

## SERMON – LOIS HARDER

James 3:1-12

### **Taming the Tongue**

I imagine we've all experienced the sting of hurtful words. Maybe being bullied at school or humiliated at work or church? The words might have come from someone we thought of as an "enemy", but the most hurtful words can often come from those we trust – that's part of what makes the sting so deep.

James is very concise and practical on this matter. He doesn't pull many punches and there's really not much that's terribly confusing or "lost in the translation" like there can sometimes be. The Greek used in James is not necessarily simple structurally, but its meaning is fairly clear. The point in this passage is that speech can be a dangerous and cruel weapon and he really calls out the role of teachers, saying that can be particularly perilous. James at least makes space for our humanity, observing that we all stumble in many ways and further, that anyone who can control their words is perfect and if they control their words, they can keep their whole bodies in check. Yeah... virtually nobody. Ok! So, at least we're all in this predicament together!

James goes on to describe the human tongue almost as if it's a separate entity – a body part that seems to have a mind and a will of its own. He compares our tongues to a bit that you put into a horse's mouth to control it, or to the rudder of a ship, again, two very small and powerful tools used to control something much larger.

I wonder whether "control" might be a key word as we unpack this lesson from James. Maybe it would be fair to say that a big part of the danger found in the use of words is that they're often used with the intent to control? That was part of James' point in talking about the expectations of teachers and why he thought they, in particular, would be judged so harshly for their misuse of words. In James' world, teachers were people who had lots of control. Teachers were people who used speech more often than nearly anyone else, especially in public. The art of oratory and rhetoric in that context was a major source of communication, education and entertainment. People would gather in crowds to hear teachers and orators read, speak and debate. Those who could speak well were given positions of power and teachers were held in high esteem. James was issuing a caution, a warning to all people, but particularly those in power, to be careful. If their words were used with arrogance and the intent to dominate, if people in those positions forgot that *they* were serving the people they were speaking to, and not the other way around, things could get ugly and out of hand pretty quickly. This reminded me of a comment that I heard the other night when I was listening on youtube to a panel discussion. The panel consisted of four people. There was a rabbi, a government official, a department chairperson from WSU and a pastor. The pastor introduced himself as the "lead servant" of the St Mark United Methodist Church.

This discipline of taming our wild tongues is a constant challenge according to James and he concedes that, truly, no one can really do it very well! It's this tiny little disastrous part of us that has unbounded potential to cause wounded-ness and wreckage and worry.

And yet... it also has the potential to create, James reminds us. With our tongues we create language and become co-creators with God as in the Genesis story, naming the beasts and the birds, the reptiles and the sea creatures. The tongue also offers us awesome and amazing possibilities. With it, testimony to God's faithfulness and love can be spoken! Truth can be spoken! Creativity and imagination can be articulated! With our tongues we sing and speak our praises to God! One of the most heinous punishments for our Anabaptist forebears who were martyred for their faith was that their tongues were cut out when they would not stop singing and reciting scripture.

So we are presented here with this double-edged sword that each one of us carries around and has the potential to use – for good and for harm. We both praise God with it and sometimes (nearly in the same breath) we curse people with it – those also made in God's own image. It shouldn't be this way! James is exclaiming.

But as with many other things, it's easy to see the clear-cut examples. It's pretty clear that we know we're not pleasing God when we sing God's praises with one breath and speak curses against people with the next. The bigger challenges come, though, when the situations have more nuance or when it's not quite so clear.

What do we do in really difficult times like the ones we're in when we're faced with multiple understandings of truth and multiple sets of facts? How do we both tame our tongues so that they don't harm people and also use them to name the ways we feel called to our faith? This is not so clear or easy.

Here are three suggestions.

First, we need to be thoughtful and careful about the language we use. That's kind of stating the obvious, so to push that out a little further, what if we could use language of faith with one another more often, incorporate it into the "normal" ways we talk to each other. Not in an overly pious "holier than thou" kind of way, but in ways that genuinely nurture our attention to one another's faith? It might mean some fairly simple adjustments. Could we move from, "How are ya?" to, "How's your spirit?" or from, "What's goin' on?", to, "Where have you noticed God's love lately?" or maybe from, "What's wrong?" to, "What are you struggling with?" and then, "Let me know what I can do to help you", to, "How could I pray for you?" Maybe that would be weird! But it might also help us to try to use language to name some important faith tenets with each other.

Second, we need to remember that behind our words lie our intentions. Are we trying to control others with our words? Or are we genuinely trying to communicate clearly, gently, honestly? What are our motivations for speaking? In these times when people are so strident with words, maybe those of us who try to follow Jesus can be less strident and more intentional about our words. It's a good discipline for us and it might offer someone else a different way of speaking.

Third, I wonder if the church (our church) is a safe place for us to practice – to help each other learn how to tame our tongues as well as how to name our faith? I don't think James is saying that taming our tongues means only being silent. I understand it to also mean being wise, honest, discerning, to speak directly, gently to one another. Maybe it would be easier to use our language in ways that please God outside the church if we can learn and practice in the church. What would that look like that's different than the way things are now? What would we need more of? Grace? Courage? Time? What would we need less of? Judgment? Fear? Self-focus?

I'll leave you with a quote from Henri Nouwen: "One of the main tasks of theology is to find words that do not divide, but unite, that do not create conflict but unity, that do not hurt, but heal."

Number 144, "God, Give Me Time" is a profound song of confession, asking God for time to learn the words that are hard for us to say, time to deal with words that threaten and destroy and time to meet God's word that transforms us.

#### PRAYER OF ASSURANCE –

O God, with you we are assured of being given what we need through your Spirit. We are assured of your love even when we stumble and our tongues betray our humanity. We are assured of your grace and mercy, offering us forgiveness and opportunities to try again and do it better. Thank you for your Spirit, your love, your grace and mercy. Amen.