

“Tongue-tied” GPPC 9-16-18
Psalm 19, James 3:1-12

When I was a kid, I won't say I had buckteeth, but I've seen beavers that had less of an overbite. My parents, God bless 'em, arranged for me to get braces. My mom took me to the orthodontist's office in Spartanburg, and it really wasn't all that much fun. The orthodontist's assistant put this mud stuff in my mouth to make dental impressions. And when she and the doctor were poking around and asking me to “open wide” and lift up my tongue, they discovered that I *could not* lift my tongue very well, because it had just a little extra flesh underneath holding it down. I was what they called tongue-tied.

So my parents scheduled an appointment with my pediatrician, Dr. White, for minor outpatient surgery in her office. The day of the surgery arrived. I lay on the table and Dr. White put something under my tongue to numb it. My father held me down (just in case) and the doctor told me to lie absolutely still. She produced a scalpel, made a tiny incision. I didn't move and didn't cry. My parents were pleased. We stopped at the drug store (I presume for a prescription) and I was allowed to pick out

Jeff Paschal

some sort of inexpensive item apparently to celebrate my bravery. And for some reason, heaven knows why, I picked out a corncob pipe. I kept it for many years, and I think I actually tried to smoke it once when I was in high school. Blech. Kids, don't try this at home.

Tongue-tied. The expression not only refers to a physical malady but it's also used to describe when our speech is awkward or shy-- tongue-tied. But according to James much of human life is tied to the tongue in a very different way.

In chapter three of his letter, James talks about "the tongue," about human speech, first by speaking briefly about teachers and then by speaking at length about the church and human speech.

He says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."

James warns that teachers will be judged with greater severity. Why? He doesn't say, but maybe because teachers should know the content of the law. Other people in the community of faith should know the law too, but they might plead some sort of ignorance, but teachers

Jeff Paschal

should have thorough knowledge of God's expectations of us. So, like police officers, lawyers, elected representatives, or judges who break the law, the expectations are higher, because the knowledge is greater, the responsibility for others is wider, and the promises made are more rigorous than for the rest of us. Maybe that's what James is getting at when he talks about the stricter judgment of teachers.

Is this judgment to be given later by God? Or is this judgment now by other human beings? Probably both. So we who teach pray for a lot of grace from God and from God's church.

By the way, Sarah, welcome as you continue your preparation to be a *teaching* elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA)!

Of course, before the rest of you breathe too heavy a sigh of relief, one scholar reminds us that teachers in the church are not so neatly defined as by an official job description or ordination. She asks, "Are our parents, who modeled their faith by attending church or reading Scripture, teachers? Are mentors, who guided us through claiming our baptismal promises, teachers? Is the woman whose house we build on a mission trip our teacher? Are the children who sing their faith in worship

Jeff Paschal

our teachers? Is it our small-group leader on a spiritual retreat?” (Kathy L. Dawson in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4*, 63-64.) As we live our lives in faith, practically any Christian could be a teacher at one time or another. It’s a heavy responsibility and wonderful opportunity, isn’t it?

Then James shifts to explain why human speech in the community of faith is such a challenge. He uses a series of everyday illustrations to make his points. A teeny bit in the mouth of a big horse. A little rudder that guides a great ship. The human tongue that hardly amounts to anything in size, but brags about all that it has done. Things that are so small, so seemingly insignificant, have incredible power to guide. That’s the way the human tongue operates.

James continues with more illustrations. He says the tongue is like a miniature fire that turns into a raging, uncontrollable inferno. Or think of the animals—land, sea, and air—we human beings have tamed them all. But nobody can tame the tongue—“a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” With the same tongue we praise God and curse our brothers and sisters. James says it’s like a mountain spring spouting cold, fresh water, but also stagnant swamp water—an impossibility. Or it’s like a fig tree,

Jeff Paschal

producing figs *and* olives. We know these are impossibilities, but we try to do the impossible with our language—out of the same mouth to bless God and curse our brothers and sisters. Our tongues, human words, guide us, poisoning the lives of others and ourselves, and starting fires that turn into infernos. We're tongue-tied.

And we know that James is not just speaking to people a long time ago. We've all made mistakes, haven't we? Instead of honest, vigorous face to face dialogue, there are the unkind church parking lot conversations after the meeting. The gossip we share in hallway whispers or in phone calls. Nasty things we will say about others behind their backs but not to their faces.

And then there are those prejudiced comments, sometimes we're aware of and sometimes oblivious to, about someone's gender or race or age or sexuality or body-type or economic status. The labeling and dismissing of others. Name-calling.

And the power of the tongue is not confined to our personal lives. It's especially important for persons in ecclesiastical leadership, because

Jeff Paschal

our language demonstrates how we will treat each other as a church and how we will treat people of other faiths.

And the power of the tongue is crucial for our political leaders too, because it sets the tone for how we will treat our fellow citizens, how we will treat other countries, and how we will treat citizens of the world, children of God, who are danger or in need.

And a final warning, the power of the tongue is also in its silence. With the tongue we pack a stadium (in any kind of weather) to scream our lungs out for a football team or a basketball team. But too often in the real world when injustice, corruption, and criminality rear their ugly heads, we have nothing to say. And heaven knows we don't want to hear about it on Sunday morning. "I need to feel joyful when I come to church." If we had our way, we would silence the modern-day prophets who disturb our false tranquility with their tongues.

James might ask, "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

Of course, you may have noticed that James does a great job of illustrating the problem here, but he says nothing about a solution.

Jeff Paschal

But we know the solutions, don't we? As James reminds us, all of us make many mistakes, but that does not excuse us from trying, by God's grace, to improve.

When we have hurt others with unfair and unkind words, we should apologize, and seek to reconcile. We should expect that of every member of the church.

When we have been silent in the face of oppression, we ought to find our tongues, stop trying to silence prophetic voices, and even pray to become a prophetic voice ourselves.

We should pay attention to the language we use with ourselves. When we make mistakes, how do we speak to ourselves? Are we too harsh? "You're so stupid. How could you do that?" Maybe, as counselors say, we need to reframe, "I'm a beloved child of God and I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I'm going to try to correct this now if I can and try to do it differently next time."

And finally we can also remember that words not only have great power to hurt, they have great power to help and to heal. Truthful words

Jeff Paschal

correct lies. Loving words dispel hatred and apathy. Challenging words inspire. Words create reality.

I remember the words of a kind professor decades ago, telling me that I had gifts and potential to be more than I had planned to be, and to do more than I thought I could do, and that I should be thinking and praying about that. I remember that conversation and others, and how they have helped me through the years.

So I invite you to close your eyes now, if you are willing. Think for a moment about your own life. Can you recall a time or times when someone spoke a word to you that changed your life for the better? Maybe it was a parent or grandparent who spoke to you. Maybe it was a teacher or a pastor or even a child. Can you recall a time when someone spoke a word of encouragement to you, a word that reminded you just how precious you are, just how much God forgives you and loves you, just how much potential you have. Can you recall a time and a person? Can you? Can you remember a time when you spoke that word to someone else?

Jeff Paschal

I invite you to open your eyes. I hope you were able to remember at least one time when someone believed in you, because God believes in you.

In a few minutes, we'll leave this sanctuary and continue with our lives. James challenges us, by God's power not our own, to improve our language, to stop our gossiping, grumbling, labeling, prejudice, name-calling, self-denigration, and to stop being silent in the face of oppression. And even more, James calls us to go and to use our language to build somebody up, to speak a word of hope, to declare the preciousness and potential of others, just as it has been declared for us.

In the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal