

## Tongue Tied

### Year B, Proper 19 – James 3:1-12

*based on a sermon Jim Drake from Brushfork (WV) Baptist Church  
preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 13, 2015*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

At 5:29 and forty-five seconds on July 16, 1945, the still dark early morning northern New Mexico sky became as bright as the noonday sun. The fireball shot upwards at three hundred, sixty feet per second, first pulsating orange, then bright red, then dark red, then black and rolling. The characteristic mushroom cloud formed at 30,000 feet. All that remained on the ground at the blast site were chunks of radioactive glass, created when the incredible heat of the explosion made contact with the desert sand. Just 21 days later, the crew of a B-29 “Superfortress” bombers dropped a single bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. As he looked down at the explosion, Robert Lewis, the co-pilot of the *Enola Gay* said, “What have we done?”

Six and a half years later, and nine hundred miles away, the still dark sky over Arco, Idaho was lit up as well, this time by light from the first *electricity* produced from nuclear energy. Today, an estimated one-fifth of America’s electricity comes from nuclear energy.

The exact same science is used in the bomb and the reactor. The exact same neutrons, the exact same electrons, the exact same collisions and reactions and physics are used to produce light, or to wreak havoc. The only difference, the *only* difference is how we choose to use them.

Just a few weeks ago, we heard Jesus say that what is in a person’s heart inevitably comes out of his mouth. Though James didn’t know about the atom, much less atomic energy, in *this* week’s epistle reading, he tells us that the tongue can be every bit as powerful, and every bit as destructive. In my reading this week, I came across a sermon from Jim Drake, a Baptist pastor from West Virginia, who laid out the problems James is talking about in a wonderful, thirty-five minute sermon that I doubt if *many* of you would happily sit still for. But I really like his alliterative list, so this morning, I invite you to pull out your green insert and follow along with me as I more quickly catalogue the caustic characteristics of the human tongue.

The first thing Pastor Drake sees in James’ description, is that the tongue is *controlling*. James talks about how a five pound bit and bridle controlling a fifteen *hundred* pound animal, and how a simple plank of wood controls even a large ship driven by the winds of nature. And then he gets to that three ounce piece of meat in your mouth and mine, that seems to control... well, pretty much whatever it wants. You don’t think so? What did Adolph Hitler’s tongue control? Or more to the point *this* week, what did Osama Bin Laden’s tongue control?

And, of course, we don’t have to look so globally to see the destruction. “If you loved me you would...” “If you don’t do what I want, I’m going to leave you,” or “I’m going to run away,” or “I’ve just had it,” or “I’ll kill myself...” Way too often, we forget that our Creator didn’t put us here to try to *control* each other in the first place, but to *care* for each other, to value and strengthen each other, to *love* one another.

Next on our list is the tongue as a *consuming* fire, but not in the same sense as I mean when I ask the Lord to set my heart on fire with his love, not in any sense that brings light and warmth. The tongue is a fire that, once it gets going, consumes everything in its path, leaving *nothing* but a smoldering path of destruction. “Hey, did you hear about so-and-so?” Ooo, there’s the spark. “No, what did you hear?” Let’s gather the kindling. “Well, so-and-so said such and such...” Now you’ve got a real blaze going. It might be a little fire, but “how great a *forest*.” James says, “is set ablaze by a small fire!”

I have seen lives destroyed by such chitter-chat. I have seen homes brought down by gossip and innuendo. I have seen churches torn apart by the spark of, “Hey, did you hear about so-an-so?” And so have you. The tongue can quickly become that consuming fire if we don’t extinguish the spark by the sweet coolness of the Spirit that bids us love one another as we have been loved, by valuing the *truth* more than the next chewy chunk of rumor.

Then, too, James says, the tongue is *corrupting*. At one level, I suppose, this includes the kind of worthless and corrosive foulness to which I became almost *numb* in my time in the military. If you screw a rusty nut onto a new bolt, the rust will quickly spread until you can’t tell the two of them apart, and so it is with the pervasiveness of that kind of language.

But the most corrupting language is the kind of language that bites. The kind of language that hurts. The kind of poison, James says, that rips open the heart of the one it is aimed at. Sarcasm that bites like a serpent. Cynicism that sink its fangs into its prey. Words that devour and cut like a sharp razor. How many of us, I wonder, inject the poison of criticism into our spouse? Into our kids? Into our friends? Perhaps we need to remember more often that in the love of Christ we are here to heal and to teach and to exhort and encourage. In our homes and in our work and in our church, we are called to spread *blessing*, not corruption.

Finally, Pastor Drake points out, the tongue is *compromising*.

A lady asked the man working in the grocery store produce department if she could buy a half a head of lettuce. He looked at her like she was crazy. “Half a head? God grows them as whole heads. That’s how we sell them.” But she insisted, so he went to ask his manager. When he found her, he said, “You won’t believe it, but back in produce there’s this crazy old bitty who wants to buy half a head of lettuce.” The manager flushed and pointed to the lady who had apparently followed him and was standing right behind him. Without missing a beat, the produce man added, “And *this* nice lady wants to know if she can have the other half.”

I don’t know what it is about us, but most of us are as compromising in the way we use our language as any of the politicians we love to hate. We always want to word things so that we come out looking just a little bit better than the next guy. And it’s been that way since Chapter 3, when Adam double-deflected his own guilt with, “It was that woman that *you* gave me.” And so we dissimilate and hedge, until such compromising speech becomes our norm, and we can’t even get out a blessing without qualifying it with a curse. We bow our head for grace at the restaurant and then turn right around and cuss the waiter for messing up your order. With the same tongue we sing, “Let us break bread together on our knees,” and then at coffee hour run our friend, or our colleague, or our neighbor through the verbal wringer, or talk about how *those* people (take your pick) should stay in their own neighborhoods. “Oh, bless their hearts.”

So, James says that our tongues are controlling, consuming, corrupting, and compromising. Only a Baptist preacher could love alliteration like that. Or the *son* of just such a preacher.

A little boy was leaving church one Sunday morning when he slipped a dollar bill into the pastor’s hand. The pastor looked at him confused and asked him, “What’s that for?” The little boy looked up at him and said, “Cuz I felt sorry for you and want to help you out.” That confused him even more, so he asked, “Why do you feel you need to help me out?” Then the boy said, “Cuz my daddy says you’re the poorest preacher he’s ever heard.” Thank goodness, I’ve never gotten such a gift.

James starts off his list today by reminding his readers that, like it or not, we are *all* teachers. *Somebody* in this life is paying attention to the way you live *yours*. Whether it is that little one beside you, or someone that you don’t even know listening for the voice of God in your voice, *somebody* is paying attention to the words that come from *your* tongue. The exact same neutrons, the exact same electrons, the exact same conversations and relationships and physiology are used to speak blessedness, or to wreak havoc and destruction. The only difference, the *only* difference is how we choose to use them. We just have to choose if we will chew the bitterness of controlling, consuming, corrupting, and compromising

tongues, or if we will taste and see that the Lord is good, and then share that sweetness with everyone whose life touches ours.