

**October 15, 2017 – Journey**

**TEXT: James 3:1–13**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

An old African chief decided to test the wisdom of the young man he had chosen to be his successor as tribal head. He asked the young man to prepare for him two meals. The first was to contain the very best ingredients life had to offer; the second meal was to contain the very worst. On the appointed day, the chief sat down to his first meal and it was a delicious plate of well-prepared cow tongue with vegetables. The chief was delighted with this delicacy and asked the young man why he had chosen it. He said, “The tongue is one of the finest parts of our being. It can speak words of truth that help our people grow and prosper. The right words can give courage and speak of the love and harmony necessary to hold our village together for generations to come.” On the next appointed day, the chief sat down for his second meal with eager anticipation. To his surprise, he found that the menu was exactly the same. When he had finished, he asked the young man why he had prepared the same meal twice. He answered, “The tongue can be the best part of us, but it can also be the worst. The tongue can speak words of anger and discouragement that tear people down and rob them of hope. It can weave deceit or spread lies that cause disharmony. The uncontrolled tongue, more than any weapon, can destroy our village life.” The old chief listened closely and knew he had chosen his successor wisely.<sup>1</sup>

There is truth in this African story, and that truth was something recognized by the author of the book of James—how the tongue is a small part of our body, but it has tremendous power to help or to harm, to promote the good news of God and the gospel or to spread damage and destruction like an unchecked wildfire. Words matter and what we say matters. This has become readily apparent to all of us over the past election season and in the current global political climate. Sadly, the wagging of so many tongues in ways that bring forth lies or discord or both means that we are rapidly losing all confidence in the power of positive discourse. We listen only to what we already believe. We treat everyone else’s words as not worthy of being heard. And we wonder why we can’t find consensus on important issues in our land.

Controlling our tongues is no easy task. James is correct, when in vs. 2 he said, “All of us make many mistakes [in speaking].” I have to be careful about the things I say—knowing that I represent this church and am a minister called to serve Jesus Christ. But I do mess up a lot. Heather and Patrice know I slip up and say things I shouldn’t—especially if I’m tired or I haven’t had my lunch. All of us have verbal filters. We bite our lips and clench our teeth to keep ourselves from saying things we ought not to say—at least some of the time. We are reminded that we have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we should speak. And honestly, it’s true that not every idea that pops into our head needs to be expressed. In this day and age of “TMI—Too Much

Information,” we could all benefit from controlling our tongues and reflecting more on when to speak and when to keep silent.

This topic runs the risk, though, of becoming trite and simplistic. I could simply flesh out this sermon with a series of platitudes about the sins of gossip (and don’t pretend yinz don’t pass on gossip) and how bad talk stains us spiritually by undermining the good things we’d like to do because of bad things we’ve said that harm or denigrate others. A tongue out of control reflects a lack of integrity—or, in the words of James, we become a source of both blessing and cursing, a spring pouring forth fresh and brackish water, a tree yielding both edible and inedible fruit. Such a thing is a mess, an abomination, a distortion of God’s will for our lives and our relationships.

But on a deeper level, the whole issue is not just about self-control and choosing the right things to say. The deeper issue relates to the power of choice itself. Theologians and scripture remind us of something important—God’s grace and saving mercy are needed to heal our very ability to choose, our individual power of choice, so that we will do what is right, do that which leads to true faith and reflects true integrity. The choices we make will never be right until, by grace, God heals our ability to choose faithfully.

This isn’t a perfect example, but think of the issue this way. You take a child inside a candy store and before you can say “Skittles” three times, all the money you give the child will be blown on sweets. But if you move the child outside the store, and show her a range of things—a fruit stand, a bank advertising savings accounts, a homeless person collecting change in a battered paper cup, another child without any candy—then her capacity to choose has been expanded to include options that are potentially more worthwhile than just Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. She may still choose selfishly or imperfectly, but at least she now has the option to choose wisely or generously.

In an analogous way, because of human sin and selfishness and finitude, we often make bad choices. We discriminate against; we pull back from others; we distance ourselves from the common good in favor of short-term satisfaction. But the love of God made known in Christ offers salvation—a combination of spiritual wholeness and right behavior so that our ability to choose has potentially been healed. By grace then, coupled with restraint, prayer, wisdom, and humility, we strengthen our bodies and souls so we can do what is right and avoid what is wrong. We tame our tongues and open our hands generously toward others. In Christian terms, this is a path of sanctification—of transformed personal freedom leading to a new life in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote about this to the Galatians and said in chapter 5: *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* Christian freedom is not just about freedom of choice. It is about a freedom from the restraints of sin that distort the very act of choosing, that stains our bodies, destroys healthy human relations,

and gives us a tongue that spews forth both blessings and curses, diminishing the spiritual integrity we are called to protect and preserve.

So how do we control our tongues? Yes, part of it comes from simply practicing restraint—considering before we speak whether our words sow seeds of peace and righteousness or ignite sparks of hurt, dissent and destruction. A young adult named Benno Nelson wrote this brief prayer for a recent worship service at his church, Lake View Presbyterian Church in Chicago. It says: *Almighty God, you are the restful night. You are the count to ten. You are the draft we write and do not send. You are the nameless, tireless diplomat. You are the safety on. To you we pray for peace for our city, our country, and our world; peace within our families, within our bodies, and within our hearts. We pray for peace until only jokes bomb, and only batters strike, and only cameras shoot.*

Control and restraint are part of a life of spiritual discipline. Yet so is an obedience and openness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ, which sets us free from sin and literally transforms our power of choice so we become people who choose wisely and with integrity. This is seen in James 3:13, when he shifts the focus from the negative to the positive and says quite directly: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.* I'll talk more about this in the sermon for the 11:00 service, but the important truth is that there is a worldly wisdom and a heavenly wisdom – a wisdom that comes to us on earth as we struggle to survive, to get ahead, to protect ourselves, our families, and our self-interests—and a wisdom that comes from above that builds on Christ-like virtues like restraint, compassion, and tolerance. There will always be those with whom we disagree. There will always be those whom we think are wrongheaded and misguided. And all those people will always be right around us—in our lives, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, sometimes our families, even in our churches.

Is the solution that we need to use our tongues with these people—to talk sense into their heads, to talk down their ideas, to tell them how they are totally wrong and we're totally right? What about the fact that to some of these people we are the problem—we are the ones who are wrong and misguided and need sense talked to us? Worldly wisdom can't help very much here. Worldly choices will only offer short-term solutions (you know, go along to get along; wait until the next election to vote the bums out). Something more is needed.

We need the wisdom and understanding spoken of by James. The recipe he offers is straightforward: Lead a good life in which works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. Not a wisdom born of certainty. Not a wisdom born of "I'm right—you're wrong because you're different, less educated, less aware, less like me." No, a wisdom born of gentleness—which is a quality that ideally exists in every relationship, in the space between two people. Start there. Let your words, (your tongue) and your actions (your hands) be guided by this principle. In

Christ, through Christ, with Christ, may all our works be done with gentleness  
born of wisdom.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Discovering the Laws of Life, John Marks Templeton, 1994, p. 189.