

Written Copy: James 3:6-10 “Extinguishing the Tongue’s Power”

16th Sunday @ Pentecost – Proper 19

Sunday, September 12th, 2021

Text: James 3:6-10

⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Exegetical Statement (the text’s context)

In the previous chapter James makes the case that an active saving faith shows itself in active saving works, works that demonstrate the saving power of the Gospel in my life and in the lives of others. He now moves on to an example of this, the works we do with our mouths. He reminds the Church that we all stumble in our walk of faith from time to time, and one of those ways is our inability to guard what we see from being the outflow of the evil that is in our hearts. We can sometimes discount the power of words to do good or evil, because they are “just words”. But James likens them to one match, one lightning strike when the forest is dry that sets a huge wildfire that is so hard to contain. He shows the discontinuity in our faith walk as we use the same mouth to sing praise and thanksgiving to God, and then with our words tear down a fellow human being that He loves and desires to save. Mankind can control huge animals like horses with a bridle, we can subdue and control all the other animals, we can use the small rudder to direct huge ships, but we cannot subdue and master the tongue to prevent it from pouring out the sin that is in our hearts. It’s as unnatural a thing for a Christian to bless the Lord and curse their neighbor as it is for fig trees to produce olives, a grapevine to produce figs, a freshwater spring to follow forth with salty water. No human being can control the restless evil of the tongue that is full of deadly poison.

Focus Statement:

Jesus sometimes says words that hurt our heart. But He says them not to harm us, but to save us. His words of law show us what’s in our heart that might pour out as poison speech. He shows us those we have hurt, the wildfires we have started. But then His Gospel Words can extinguish the hurt in our lives and work to put out the fire in the lives of others as we confess and ask forgiveness of Him and those we hurt. Baptismal waters cleanse my heart and put out the fires sin has caused.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

We all have moments when the guard we keep over our mouth fails, and we say hurtful evil things about others. This includes not just what we say, but our body language, and in the digital age what we post. Once it’s out it spreads like a wildfire that is beyond our ability to control

What the hearer should do as a result:

Prayerfully consider our responses, especially when we’ve been offended. Consider what we say in non-verbal communication. Find a friend who can be a confidant to share things that hurt us. Be active in repentant faith, asking God to show us our sin, and share His grace, then share that grace with others, not being afraid to ask forgiveness when we have spoken badly

Subject Sentence: Our tongue sets fires, Jesus came to extinguish them.

Introduction: Wildfires in California

Just in case you think that Scripture is antiquated and out of date, consider the imagery James uses in our Epistle Lesson to illustrate the damage we can do with our words. He compares it to the destructive force of a wildfire. We have right now real-life examples of this going on in California. (*Show wildfire picture*) There are to date 15 major forest fires burning there, nine of those are currently 80-98% contained. The rest far less so. One of these: The Dixie Fire started July 14th of this year. It has destroyed almost 100,000 acres stretching across 5 counties. It is only 62% contained at this time. The source of the fire is under investigation.

So what might have started it? A lightning strike in an area where everything is dry can start one. But there is also the human element such as carelessness by campers who have campfires when the forestry service tells them not to, or those who burn yard waste. All it takes is one errant spark and a blaze is started that those who are watching it are not equipped to control. A lit cigarette tossed out the window that falls among dried brush can do the same. Many times it seems the people that started them never intended to do harm, but once the fire started, they were helpless to control the spread. They never intended to cause such widespread damage. There are those fires that smolder underground, especially in peat moss, that look like they are out but can spring back to life again far from where the original fire was burning, as it smolders underground, undetected. These are almost impossible to put out.

Our tongue is like a flame that sets lives on fire

James 3:5-6 ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

Just as it only takes a spark to set a forest ablaze, it doesn't take much in this day and age to start a fire of unrighteousness in our lives and the lives of others. Our culture is as ready to be offended as the dried-out forests of California are to burn. People seem to be looking for a fight, and those people are sometimes you and me. If someone holds a different opinion on politics, or a current hot button issue such as abortion, or mandatory COVID-19 vaccination, have you felt the fire of disagreement welling up inside you? It rises so hard and so quick that you cannot even let the person you're talking to finish speaking. You have to go on the attack and put them in their place right this instant, because if you don't, then you feel deep down in the pit of your stomach that all will be lost. It's almost as if the fate whatever position is being debated hangs on the balance of you defending it. And like a wildfire, the discussion may not just stay between the two of you. Soon others around you join in and take sides, maybe not even realizing what either of you have already said. Things you are saying are taken out of context. And the wildfire is off, burning out of

control. Burning like its set on fire by hell. This can happen even when you are arguing the truth of Scripture. Your anger rises, their anger rises, our sinful heart adds fuel to the fire, and now it has become a wildfire fueled by the depths of hell.

James 3:2 For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

Perhaps you think that James isn't describing you. After all, you are more or less and introvert. You don't get into arguments with anyone, at least in person. But what are you saying through the tone of your voice? What are you communicating through non-verbal cues? If our speech sometimes escapes our ability to guard our mouths how much more does our non-verbal communication: the raising of the eyebrows, the rolling of the eyes, the turning away from the person speaking, or focusing on something else, not to mention those responses that show you have not been listening. Can any of those start a wildfire that smolders underground until something else sets it ablaze?

And if James was writing to the Church today, what do you think he would have to say about the things we post on social media? How hard is it for you to scroll past those post that disagree with your opinions on things without adding some short pithy remark to put the person in their place, especially if they are commenting on what you have posted? How often do you add your own agreeable comment to the negative posts of others, or even share them, without realizing who you may be offending? Does the good that you believe sharing this will do outweigh the damage that it can do to your witness and example as a Christian? How great a wildfire can we start with a click of a mouse? And while we can delete a post or comment from our webpage, is it deleted from other people's pages, other people's eyes?

James 3:8-10 ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

How about those times when the fire someone else has lit comes and burns you? When the evil and deadly poison spewing from someone else's lips has you as its center target? What about when it comes from someone whom you consider a friend? When it comes from a brother in Christ, how does that make you feel? Maybe a lot like the scorched earth that remains after a fire has burned through (*show picture of the damage from a fire*). When you were young you probably heard on the playground "***Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.***" As most of us can attest to that is a lie. What others say about us, especially in the presence of others can and does hurt. It's the fire that comes raging in and leaves only scorched earth behind. It can destroy friendships and relationships seemingly beyond repair. When we've been hurt by the wildfire of someone's words it can be a long time for us to forgive them, and they to forgive us. And there are always those things that smolder underground like a peat fire, where even when it seems

forgiveness has been granted, the anger and hurt is still there, underground, ready to flame back up into a wildfire at a moments notice given the right conditions.

God's Healing Words to Us that Sometimes Hurt

James says that the mouth of a Christian is for giving praise and thanksgiving to our Lord and Savior. But what about His words to us? What about how this reading is affecting your mind, as well as what it's doing to your heart? What is James saying to you? Does that fire of conviction of sin burning within you hurt too? How is that any different than the fires you start burning in others, or they in you?

Jesus says the difference is found in the heart. **Matthew 15:18-19** ¹⁸ **But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.** ¹⁹ **For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.** These awful and evil things exist in your heart and mine. That's why even those words we share with others that we intend for "their own good" don't come out that way. We struggle to guard what comes pouring out of hearts through our mouth. And how people hear what we are saying is affected by this same heart condition as well.

But what about Jesus' words to us? His words of law and conviction? These words that stand before us today, what kind of heart do they come from? A heart that is filled with the strongest, most precious kind of love, for you! Jesus presents these words as written by His half-brother James not to tear you down out of hate. They are fueled by a supernatural love that has your very best interests at heart, what is best for you now and going forward until the end. Moved by this great supernatural love He shows us our sin. He is pointing in my life, and I pray in yours as well, to those times and places where I set wildfires ablaze, sometimes intentionally and unintentionally. And when He points these things out. It hurts.

But then He points to His sacrifice on your behalf and mine. He points to His work on the cross and the empty tomb. He assures you and I that although we have hurt others, He took the pain and the punishment we were due in the eyes of the Father. Because even though we hurt our fellow man, the one we really offend is God Himself, in whose likeness our fellow man was created. All those hurtful words, nonverbal messages, even hurtful Facebook posts have been forgiven and forgotten by our God through the salvation work of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to put out the sinful fire that burns in your heart and mine.

The fires that we start in the lives of others, and the fires that burn in our own consciousness caused by the words of others can be extinguished by the only water that has the power to do so, baptismal water. It keeps flowing into your heart and your life, dousing the evil that lurks in your heart, soothing the pain that is felt by your ego, and bringing the love of Christ to rule in place of anger and hurt. The Spirit shows us our sin so that He can direct where these healing waters of Christ's love are most needed. As we ask forgiveness for hurtful words His supernatural healing power is at work.

That baptismal water, and the Spirit that works through it, move us to forgive those that have set our lives ablaze with their words. It reminds us that we too have been guilty of such arson, and moves us to forgive just as we desire to be forgiven. No other water can do such miraculous work because no other water has the power of God behind it to heal and restore.

Learning to control our tongue

James speaks the truth of our Christian lives (**James 3:2**) **For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.** Our goal as Christians should be control our walk so that we don't stumble. Our goal is to bridle our words and our actions so that we don't sin against one another and hurt one another, and thereby be a living witness of the love of Christ. How do we endeavor to walk without stumbling? We keep a different kind of fire burning in our hearts, one that burns not for ourselves, but for Jesus. We begin the day with Him in devotional thoughts and prayer based on Scripture. We head out not telling Jesus to come along with us, but seeking to follow Him, allowing Him control of our time, talents, and treasure as He sees fit. We say to Him, ***“Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee. Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise, let them flow in ceaseless praise.”***

We ask Him to help us see our fellow man in the same way that Jesus sees Him, as one much loved by the Father, one for whom Jesus gave His life, and so we should lay down our lives for them. We remember that we have two ears and one mouth, and therefore should do twice as much listening as talking. Then, when we do speak, we should measure what we say against God's love for them, and for you. And even more importantly realize that you don't have to respond to someone else's opinion of an issue, or even their opinion about you. Most of the time the wisest things you can say comes after purposeful and prayerful deliberation. And if the opportunity never comes around to address that again, consider that a blessing from the LORD. While it is important that Christians stand up for what the Scriptures give witness to concerning today's issues, we should always share that position not with words set on fire by hell, but with speech that is full of the healing power that comes from the baptismal waters of the Gospel, waters that have love for all people. And I can testify that it doesn't hurt one bit to just scroll past those Facebook posts that are fires from the pit of hell trying to set ablaze the lives of others.

Conclusion

During our Prayers of the Church we will pray for all those firefighters and first responders working to halt the wildfires in California, as well as for all those who have suffered loss because of them. We pray to the God who is powerful enough to stop them dead in their tracks according to His own timetable. This is the same God who is at work in your heart through the healing waters of baptism to douse the sinful flames that seek to pour out in your speech and your actions. He is at work to stop you from creating fires that burn out of control, as well as heal you from those fires that have burned and hurt you. He gives to you the love of Christ that flows from the cross through your baptism so that you can go afterwards in the wreckage that your hasty words have caused to heal and restore with the words spoken from the heart, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." May He continue this work in each one of us until the day we see Him face to face, with all that evil permanently removed from our hearts and our lives. Amen.