

### **Proverbs 1:20-33**

<sup>20</sup>Wisdom cries aloud in the street; in the markets she raises her voice;  
<sup>21</sup>on the top of the walls she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:  
<sup>22</sup>“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?  
<sup>23</sup>Give heed to my reproof; behold, I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.  
<sup>24</sup>Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,  
<sup>25</sup>and you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof,  
<sup>26</sup>I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,  
<sup>27</sup>when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.  
<sup>28</sup>Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me.  
<sup>29</sup>Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
<sup>30</sup>would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof,  
<sup>31</sup>therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.  
<sup>32</sup>For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
<sup>33</sup>but he who listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of evil.”

### **Psalms 19 (UMH 750)**

#### **James 3:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup>For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup>Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup>So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature and set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, <sup>8</sup>but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with

it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine yield fresh.

### **Mark 8:27-38**

<sup>27</sup>And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" <sup>28</sup>And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." <sup>29</sup>And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." <sup>30</sup>And he charged them to tell no one about him. <sup>31</sup>And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." <sup>34</sup>And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? <sup>37</sup>For what can a man give in return for his life? <sup>38</sup>For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

### **Revised Standard Version of the Bible**

#### **Loose Lips Sink Ships**

*The lady considered herself to be a pillar of her church, a moral watchdog on the lifestyles of others. It gave her great pleasure to know she was following the Ten Commandments. The only thing which gave her greater pleasure was pointing out the sins and shortcomings of others. When she spotted what appeared to be a transgression in someone else, she considered it her obligation to be outspoken in her opposition. And she was outspoken to anyone who would listen.*

*She was outspoken the day she spotted the truck of one of the leaders of the Lutheran church parked in front of one of the local watering holes, the town's VFW. She noted the truck stayed there from 1:00 p.m. on Saturday afternoon to 4:30. She knew the exact time because she kept a vigilant eye on the truck and the clock. Scandalous! Outrageous! An embarrassment to the community and church. That's what she said to about 20 people.*

*Eventually, word of what she was saying got back to the truck's owner, the church leader. As a bachelor, he often was called upon to help others. That day he'd been helping a neighbor lay sod in his back yard. After they were done, his neighbor offered to buy him a beer. A beer. Is it necessary for me to tell you that Lutherans don't always think it a major transgression to indulge in a little, uh, liquid bread? Well, this man had only one beer. The rest of the time his truck was parked in front of the VFW, he had been downtown running some errands. He had left his truck, walked downtown, bumped into friends and they had talked. That's what people in small towns do; they talk. It would have been unneighborly for him not to do so. That's why his truck had been at the bar for so long.*

*Now, this church leader was a wise man. He didn't try to run around explaining what had really happened. Explaining doesn't work, and the people who knew him hadn't believed the lady's story anyway. So, what did he do? The man waited. Then, the next Friday night, he drove his truck to the gossip's home, parked it out front, and walked home, smiling. He left his truck in front of her house all night long.*

That story is courtesy of Rev. Dr. Ken Klaus of the Lutheran Hour radio show. It is a perfect story to begin with when preaching about this morning's scripture passage from the Book of James. You may remember that last Sunday, Carol preached a sermon on a passage from James that talks about working the faith. Well, in this week's scripture reading James is talking about the danger of an uncontrolled tongue. The sermon title "Loose Lips Sink Ships" comes from a World War Two era poster. The poster warned people to be careful about what they said, because the wrong information could get into the hands of the enemy, and cost the lives of American soldiers and sailors. That, of course, was before The New York Times began publishing national secrets on their front page, above the fold.

*A pious woman with a rather sharp tongue, who professed to be a Christian but gossiped like an old hen--approached the rector of her church in London. She complained that the white bands which he wore with his pulpit gown were altogether too long and that this annoyed her greatly. She wanted permission to shorten them and had come armed with a pair of scissors. The pastor agreed, handed over the bands, and the woman snipped away with her scissors and then handed the garments back to the rector.*

*He said, "Now, my good woman, there is something about you which is altogether too long and which has annoyed me and many others for quite some time, and since one good turn deserves another, I would like your permission to shorten it."*

*Startled, the woman said, "Certainly sir, you have my permission to do so and here are the shears." Whereupon, the pastor smiled and said, "Very well madam, stick out your tongue."*

And there is the tombstone of Arabella Young in an English country cemetery. Written on the headstone is her epitaph:

Beneath This Stone, A Lump Of Clay,  
Lies Arabella Young,  
Who, On The Twenty-Fourth Of May  
Began To Hold Her Tongue.

Now before you think that I am picking on women, here's another story.

*There once was a little boy who had a bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, he must hammer a nail into the back of the fence.*

*The first day the boy had driven six nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as he learned to control his anger, the number of nails hammered daily gradually dwindled. He discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence. Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper. The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone.*

*The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. You can put a knife in a man and draw it out. It won't matter how many times you say I'm sorry, the wound is still there. A verbal wound is as bad as a physical one.*

It was Mother Theresa, who said: *"Kind words can be short and easy to speak--but their echoes are truly endless."* What a contrast with the previous stories. As James writes in verse 10, *"Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."*

As an occasional preacher, I squirmed a bit when I read this passage from James. While James writes to all Christians, he has a special message for teachers and preachers concerning the words we use. Those of us who teach and preach will be judged with a greater strictness. It's enough to get me

wondering what I'm doing up here.

Dr. Brack at Drew University taught with tongue in cheek that *"words are what set human beings above the lower animals."* Compare that sentiment with what passes for civilized political discourse these days. Remember the childhood nursery rhyme we learned as small children, *"Sticks and stones can break my bones--but names will never hurt me"*? How wrong. Words and names used wrongly are deadly like poison darts.

William Shakespeare knew of the power of words when he wrote, *"He who takes from me my good name, takes that which enriches him--but makes me poor indeed."* Yes, when anger spreads through thy breast--guard thy tongue from barking wildly. St. Augustine wrote years ago that a preacher is a "vendor of words," and because of this teaching in James' Epistle, it frightened him a great deal.

If that is not challenging enough, James writes in verse 8, *"No man can tame the tongue."* It is as if James is saying your conversion to Jesus Christ is not fully completed until your tongue has been baptized as well. Even Charles Haddon Spurgeon was forced to conclude, *"Tongue sins--are GREAT sins."* And John Calvin wrote, *"The only thing more damaging than a loose cannon--is a slippery and loose tongue."* For me, the times that I have gotten in the biggest trouble, and caused the most hurt, is when I didn't keep my mouth shut. My biggest regrets have come from things that I have said, rather than things that I did.

We have read the scripture today and heard the words from James 3:1-12 in which we see that the problems of the tongue and communicating properly is not a new problem-- but an ancient problem that demands daily attention and action. It needs control.

When you go to the doctor's office for a checkup, one of the first things you are asked to do is to stick out your tongue. Then the doctor takes a tongue depressor and presses down the tongue to examine your throat and mouth. The tongue is a great help in determining our physical condition.

The writer, James, says that the same principle is at work in our spiritual life and maturity as a follower of Jesus Christ.

It has been said, "We know metals by their tinkling and men by their talking."

The writer James further demonstrates that although the tongue is small, it has great influence and power over the rest of the body. It may only weigh two ounces

but it can cause tons of damage.

Look at the images James uses in describing the power of the tongue: In verse three it is compared to a bit in the mouth of a horse. Nothing is quite as scary as a horse out of control--like a bull in a china shop. In verse 4, the tongue is compared to a rudder on a large ship--a small appendage that controls the entire body. In verse 5, James compares it to a spark which can set the whole forest burning.

Perhaps the greatest insight that James shares is that without the constraining and controlling power of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to tame the tongue from its natural tendency to hurt and harm. Only when the *"tongue is under the power of the Holy Spirit--can it be used to heal--not hurt."* In our own strength, we are incapable of overcoming the power of evil, which really is at the center of the problem of the tongue.

I want to suggest two ways that we can use our tongues in the manner that Jesus would want us to.

First, all of the words from our tongues should bless--rather than blast or burn--another human being.

The story is told of two literary clubs at the University of Wisconsin a number of years ago. There was a group of brilliant young men who gathered to read their stories and essays to each other. They dubbed themselves, "The Stranglers," so fierce was their criticism of one another. No punches were pulled. They dissected each others' work unmercifully.

There was a women's literary group at the University as well. They called themselves, "The Wranglers." They offered helpful criticism to one another, but above all, they supported and encouraged one another in their writing careers. They hunted for kind things to say. Years later came the results. Not one of the men in the men's group went on to become a writer of note, but from the women's group, over half a dozen became famous writers, including Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings who wrote The Yearling. (3)

Remember the Apostle Paul gave a great insight when he declared, *"Even though I can speak in the tongues of men and angels--if I have not love--I have gained nothing."* Our tongue, if used for harm, leaves a great stain in the fabric of life. That, unfortunately, is not a good witness for our Lord.

Proverbs 12:18 says, *"Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword--but wisely spoken words can heal."* To which support group does your tongue belong?

Second, the tongue reveals whether it is connected to the spirit or to the sewer.

I believe James indicates this in verse 12 when he writes, *"Can a fig tree bear olives--or a grape vine bear figs?"* Perhaps what we say on the outside is always determined by what is on the inside.

I read a story about four physicians who were quarreling about which part of the body was most important for life. They could not reach a consensus among themselves so they consulted the Rabbi.

*"Of course the heart and blood vessels are most important,"* said the first physician, *"for on them the whole of life depends."*

*"Not at all,"* said the second physician. *"It is the brain and nerves which are most vital, for without them, even the heart would not beat."*

The third physician said, *"You are both wrong. It is the stomach and the digestive passages which are important, for without the proper digestion of food, the body will die."*

*"The lungs are most important,"* declared the fourth, *"for a person without air will surely die."*

*"You are all wrong,"* said the Rabbi. *"There are two vessels of the body only that are important, but you have no knowledge of them."*

*"What are they?"* asked the physicians.

The Rabbi replied, *"One is the channel that runs from the ear to the soul and the other is the channel that runs from the soul to the tongue."*(4)

This is the exact anatomy lesson that Dr. James of Jerusalem is sharing in our scripture lesson today. Yes, when our tongues are connected to our souls, our words come from a source that blesses life, not corrupts it. Our words are to be governed by God.

The story of a very successful fisherman comes to mind. Two animal rights activists rebuked him, *"Aren't you ashamed of yourself for so cruelly catching those poor little fish?"* Without even looking up the fisherman replied, *"Fellas, if those fish had kept their mouths shut, they wouldn't have been caught!"* Are we opening our mouths for the right reasons? Do our words reflect the Holy Spirit's guidance or our own desires?

Once upon a time, a preacher visited a rural church as the guest speaker. This

man had a reputation as a great orator, and he lived up to his reputation. His voice was powerful, his gestures were perfect and his logic was persuasive. His sermon had little to do with the Bible, but as a speech, it was a masterpiece. When the sermon was finished, an old man in the audience was asked by a friend what he thought of it. The old man had been a Christian for many years and he was a man of much wisdom and few words. He summed it up this way, *"Much wind; loud thunder; no rain."* This is not a good testimony. Christians can do a lot of talking, but the true test of faith is whether or not that talking is consecrated by God.

Almost every Sunday in pulpits around the world, the preacher pauses to pray, *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."*

The tongue is a tremendously powerful tool. You can make a person feel like a zero--or a hero. May God tame it--that we may always speak the truth in love. I think Charles Wesley had the right idea about how we are to use our tongues when he wrote:

O for a thousand TONGUES to sing  
My great Redeemer's praise  
The glories of my God and King  
The triumphs of His Grace.

Let's close today with the words of an Old Irish Blessing:

Three things are of God:  
The merciful word; the singing word  
and the good word.  
May the power of these three holy  
things be on all the men and women  
of the earth forevermore. AMEN.