

## Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 16, 2012

James 3:1-12      Speaking that Creates Life

Back in seminary, Lynne and I were part of a small group with three others couples – we were all newlyweds.

One evening in one of our apartments, we were talking about our wedding ceremonies – and it wasn't long until Larry and I imagined a wedding ceremony gone wrong.

At the part of the ceremony where the vows are exchanged, the pastor has the groom reciting his vows until he says, "till death do you part?"

At this point the groom hesitates and gulps – asking, "till death?" To which the pastor responds "till death?" The best man joins in, "till death," then the future mother-in-law chimes in, "till death," as the organist peers over the top of the organ and somberly expresses "till death."

Then still with no response from the groom, the bride piercingly looking into her future husbands eyes asks, "Yes, till death?"

Larry and I had a way of playing off each other, as we rolled on the floor laughing – though no one else thought it was as funny as we did.

When I picture James, as Jesus' younger brother, John Cleese comes to mind – the British comedian of Monty Python Flying Circus (the UK precursor to SNL), Fawlty Towers and many comedic roles in film. Why?

**Because of James' dry wit.**

James pans: "We stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect able to keep their whole body in check" – that's gotta be sarcasm – **who of us does not struggle in what we say or how we say it?**

I manage to struggle with what I say and how I say it **often right here** in front of you on Sunday mornings.

James presents a number of analogies of control and discipline – bits in the mouths of horses, a rudder on a ship; and the tongue as well is small and yet shapes the direction of our lives by what we say – just think about careers which have ended by what was said, texted, or sexted.

The image of the tongue – is not presented as a bit or a rudder – but rather a spark that burns down a forest – "a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, . . . It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" Enough to cause us to figure out ways to have our tongues surgically removed – the tongue cannot be tamed – there is no way we are able to be perfect able to keep our lives in check."

"With it we praise God and curse one another. It is both fresh and salt water coming out of our lives" It seems that nothing short of a vow of silence is necessary to control our tongues.

Eugene Peterson restates it in this way:

"A word out of your mouth may seem to be of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything – or destroy it! It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your

mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell. This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue – it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongue we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessing out of the same mouth! My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?" (*The Message*)

James does not seem to offer much in the way of solutions  
– only seems to raise more questions  
– **but he leaves us pondering what to do with our tongues.**

**We are all too aware of the destructive nature of our tongues – we easily tear others down.**

But we were made in the image of God, by the God of life who created all there is **by merely speaking all into existence.**

We who are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus,

- We who have put on Christ,
- We who set aside our own agendas to participate with God in God's mission
- We may not have the ability to control our tongues,
- **yet we desire our tongues to be creative, rather than destructive.**

Are we are ones in whom the Spirit has been set free?

Has not the Spirit has been planted in us?

Does the Spirit not develop us into Christlikeness?

**So the Spirit in us is able to transform and shape our tongues to be creative – rather than destructive!**

**Through the Spirit**, we can participate with God in speaking and act creatively in the world  
– speaking life, hope, joy, and peace into reality

Jesus expresses this in John 7 (v. 38) when he says that whoever believes in him will have rivers of living water flowing from within them – referring to the presence of the Spirit in the lives of those who would be his disciples.

The larger context, as we examine John 7, is that the religious leaders, as well as his brothers were ridiculing Jesus.

James, in writing his letter, must have remembered how with his own tongue he ridiculed and cut down his own big brother Jesus:

“Jesus’ brothers said to him, ‘Leave Galilee and go to Judea so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things show yourself to the world. For even his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:3-5)

The religious leaders, also, were accusing Jesus of destructive speech,

That he was deceiving the masses by what he was saying – that he was demon-possessed.

Those in power found his speech threatening of the established order  
– their power over the downtrodden and marginalized.

**Jesus response to these accusations is to declare the source of his speech:**

“My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but the one who seeks the glory of the one who sent them is a person of truth; there is nothing false about them” (vv. 16-18).

**Living and speaking creatively has less to do with our ability to control and more to do with **in whom our lives are rooted, in whom our speech, our actions are rooted.****

If our lives are rooted in ourselves, our own agendas, shaping our own destinies – our speech is far from creative, even as we attempt to make a name for ourselves.

In promoting ourselves, we diminish relationships, we diminish others, and we promote something other than God’s reign.

Yet, when our lives are rooted in Christ Jesus, rooted in the Holy Spirit, **then we come to recognize that living and speaking creatively is a result of yielding and participating with God who is always creative and re-creative in the world:**

“For whoever want to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it”

To be creative with God in this world, to live creatively, to speak creatively, is to be deeply embrace Jesus and to be embraced by Jesus and Jesus’ purposes.

– “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross (to die to the powers which have a hold on us) and follow me” (Mark 8:34-36).

The power of glossalalia – speaking in tongues, as on the Day of Pentecost

– was not about our having the power to speak in other languages

– or to show off how the Spirit is in us (as many believers in Corinth struggled with),

But the power of the day of Pentecost

– was how the Spirit transformed the speaking, the tongues, of mere unschooled Galileans so that those who came from all parts of the world to Jerusalem “heard them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues” (Acts 2:12).

The tongue indeed can be a destructive power

– but under the influence of the Spirit

– our speaking, our tongues, our lives – participate in the re-creative and creative working of God in the world

– declaring the wonders of God.

As we reflect on this practical matter of the tongue which James expresses, I invite each one of us to be open to be influenced by the Spirit – to speak creatively – for our speech to be an extension of God’s creative speech in the world.

As we speak in the power of the Spirit – listen to what you hear yourself saying, to whom you say it, and where you say what you say

– just watch

– **you will witness living water flowing out from you.**