

On the Tips of our Tongues

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 13, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (James 3:1-12, NRSV)

Small things matter. Seemingly unimportant factors and choices can have enormous consequences. To borrow a memorable phrase from J.R.R. Tolkien, it is such that move the wheels of the world.

Perhaps you have heard the medieval English proverb, “For want of a nail”, often associated with the death of King Richard III, which would remind us that seemingly insignificant acts or omissions can lead to ends which are very significant:

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.*

Mathematicians and complexity theorists have spoken of the “Butterfly Effect” – the phenomenon in which *tiny* changes in the initial conditions of a closed system can result in unpredictably *large* changes in that system over time. The name for the effect is derived from a metaphorical example: the details of a hurricane ... its strength, its path ... being influenced by

the tiniest fluctuations in the movement of air weeks earlier, such as that caused by the flapping of a butterfly's wings this way and not that way.

While it may be hard for our imaginations to get around this idea of butterflies influencing the strength and course of hurricanes, it is not so hard to recognize from our own experience the larger point. It is humbling to consider how entire life trajectories – entire destinies – turn on having been in *one particular* place and not another, at *this* time and not that time ... making a particular phone call or not ... going to the coffee shop or not ... having a random conversation or not. How easy it is to trace back from our present place in life to things in the past that happened in a *particular* way, and that if even very small details had been other than they were, your life would be completely different, for better or for worse.

James, the author of our scripture text this Sunday, recognizes the power of small things to have great influence. As a writer deeply steeped in the wisdom tradition of his Jewish heritage, he is especially attuned to the ways in which truth manifests itself in small, everyday, ordinary ways. He observes how something so small as a bit in the mouth of a horse allows a rider to guide its movement ... how something so tiny as a rudder on the back of a great ship allows the captain to determine its course over the seas. A bit, a rudder ... each so physically insignificant (relative to the size and strength of a horse, the grandness of a great vessel), and yet, with *so much power*.

But, as James observes, there is another small thing – as seemingly insignificant as a simple bit, a non-descript rudder, or an everyday choice – that trumps all others. And his language is as evocative as it is emphatic. It is the human tongue ... the words we speak and how we speak them ... that hold the power of life and death:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3:5b-8, NRSV)

There is an old saying we have heard from our childhood: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Has there ever been a common saying so manifestly false, so untrue to experience? We all know – as those who have been on both on the giving and receiving ends – the dark power of words to harm, to poison, to kill.

There is the thoughtless word said in jest that stings a friend, or the simple “Oh?” or “Really?” that can plant the seeds of self-doubt. There are the words of callous cruelty typed over social media that can serve as a catalyst for a downward spiral of self-destruction.

There are the words of rage that, once spoken, cannot be taken back. In Marilynne Robinson's poignant novel *Gilead*, the narrator, Congregationalist minister John Ames, reflects that “A little too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever

imagine. Above all, mind what you say. ‘Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire, and the tongue is a fire’ – that’s the truth.”

And that *is* the truth.

But it’s not *just* the unmasked malevolent power of the tongue to hurt individual people. It is also the enormous, ongoing power of our words to frame and shape worlds, that lead to different ways of seeing and treating entire groups of people.

We have millions living decently and working hard in our midst who are, for any number of reasons, here without proper legal documentation. Some call them “undocumented immigrants.” Others call them “illegal aliens” – often simply shortened to “illegals.” We have thousands of others at the southern border trying to escape unimaginable hardships in Central America. Some would look at them and say that they’re risking incredible danger for the chance of giving their children a better life. Others would look and see only murderers and rapists who deserve what they’re getting.

The choice of which words we use is not value-neutral. The choice is laden with implications for how we then look at our fellow human beings, created in the image of God, and consequently, for how we relate to them *as* human beings – or cast them as something less.

There is no question of the impressive number of objective difficulties raised by these circumstances. The issues involved are complicated and can’t rightly be reduced to slogans. But words which demean millions of struggling people – words which frame a much larger narrative of defensiveness and fear – would falsely absolve us of the sacred responsibility to *confront* those difficulties with level-headed reason *and* compassion at either a spiritual or practical level.

Our words matter, and just as our words have enormous power to hurt and cause suffering, they also have the power to give life and to shape it. You could say that the Kingdom of God begins right here on the tips of our tongues.

Are we not all here because very ordinary yet precious saints have spoken into our lives words that gave us hope, that built us up, or that maybe even turned our lives around at just the right time? Words do have the power to hurt and kill, but they also have the power to heal. They can set a course for hopelessness and despair, or they can set a spirit free – free to be and become all that it can be.

I’ve spoken before to some of you of my spiritual seeking in my college years. Though I had been raised in a very devout Presbyterian home, by Thanksgiving of my 1st year I had become uncertain of all of it. I became an agnostic, but I wanted something to know what the truth is ... what I could give my life to. And that led me to explore everything that was out there in the way of different philosophies and other religions.

But it was simply being invited to church about halfway through my senior year by a dear friend (and drinking buddy!) that started something new. He wanted me to join him at St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel to attend worship and hear and meet the chaplain – Father Hank, they called him.

My friend knew that at that point I was not exactly big on organized religion, and he knew that to the extent I *had* religious ideas, they were pretty unorthodox. But maybe I was more ready than I realized. I had just finished reading a book which I had found wildly stimulating – by an *Anglican bishop*, no less! The book was John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God* ... a relatively short book written in the 1960's, and compared to the Christianity I was used to, a motherlode of some radical and subversive theological ideas (which, of course, meant that I loved it!).

And so, I woke up on a Sunday morning, put on a tie as I thought any self-respecting male church attender should do, and went to chapel. What I heard was extraordinary: a priest talking about justice and peace issues, about poverty and race ... about how this chapel was a home for people who weren't sure they could say the creed with integrity ... about how he *wanted* a church of searching agnostics ... about how he dreamed of a community that *cared* for one another and placed much more value on how we treat one another than on the details of what we do, or don't, or are not sure we believe. I had to pinch myself a few times to be sure that this was all really happening.

After church, I told my friend that I would join him later, and I sought out some after-church time with Father Hank. I told him how much I appreciated his sermon. I told him my story. I told him that I had just finished this book *Honest to God* (oh yes, he knew of it!) and that I was exhilarated by it, but was also left wondering if there was really room in the Church for people like that ... for people like John A. T. Robinson ... for people like ... *me*.

Father Hank smiled. He looked at me with a compassion in his eyes that I know now came from a place deep within himself, deeply rooted in his own story and his own struggles with life and faith. And what he said next changed my life. I'll never forget his words. He looked at me and said, "Not only is there *room* in the Church for people like Bishop Robinson, but we *need* more people like him!"

"Father Hank," I said, "I'll see you at church next Sunday."

In the immortal words of radio man Paul Harvey, "And now you know the rest of the story."

Our words matter. Simple words, expressed in love, change lives. Ordinary words, chosen with wisdom and spoken with conviction, can change the world. May we always recognize the extraordinary power we carry. This world, and the Church, need those who will exercise wisdom in what they say, and sprinkle their words with grace. The world, and the Church, need very ordinary-looking prophets who are not afraid to speak the truth, but who always temper it with love.

For it really is true: The very Kingdom of God is right here on the tips of our tongues.

To the glory of God. Amen.