

From the Pastor's Desk

Taming the Tongue

On a windswept hill in an English country churchyard stands a gray slate tombstone. The faint epitaph states:

*Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
lies Isabel Young,
who, on the twenty-fourth of May,
began to hold her tongue.*

Let's learn what Isabel never did on this side of the grave – to tame the tongue!

“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. 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.”

James 3:3-8 (Second reading for Sunday, Sept. 20th)

As we go through life we have many opportunities to restrain our tongues and should take advantage of them. With the Psalmist we pray: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.” Psalm 141:3

While the tongue may never be totally tamed, if we take our faith seriously, we understand that we are engaged in the ongoing battle to tame the tongue.

Saint Paul tells us in Galatians: “Let us live by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit.” Galatians 5:17 As followers of Jesus we strive to live according to the Spirit but find that it is often in conflict with the flesh. Martin Luther describes Christians as “simultaneously saint and sinner.” This both/and approach is a distinctly Lutheran understanding of who we are in God's eyes. Perhaps nowhere is this seen more than in our speech.

The author of the Book of James would disagree with the familiar children's taunt: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” He knew his Bible, particularly Proverbs 12:18 “The one who speaks rashly is like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

In November of 1980, after a very dry autumn, on a windy day an arsonist lit a fire in the tinder-dry brush just above San Bernardino, California. The high winds quickly fanned the flames up the mountain toward the town of Crestline. While firefighters were trying to contain that blaze, the same arsonist drove to the east and then back to the west, lighting more fires in each location. Those who lived in that area had only a short time to evacuate. Several homes were destroyed killing four people. Forest fires are devastating and so are the fires started by the human tongue.

Jewish author and speaker, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has lectured around the country about the powerful and often negative impact of words. He often asks his audiences: "Can you go for twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about, or to, anybody?" "Consistently", he says, "a minority of listeners raise their hands signifying yes, but the majority indicate no - they cannot go for twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about, or to, anybody." The Rabbi goes on to say, "Those who can't answer 'yes' must recognize that they have a serious problem. If you cannot go for twenty-four hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go for twenty-four hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go for twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue. There is no area of life where so many of us systematically violate the Golden Rule."

The third chapter of the book of James is the key to harmony and a pleasant environment within our souls; and, at home, in the work place, at church or in any other group of people.

In this technological age of email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other modes of electronic communication, we must be vigilant about the power of our printed words. A new term has been coined: "Crowd pounding". It is seen when multitudes of people using electronic communication pounce on someone by using abusive language and insults. It's an on-line mob attempting to destroy someone's reputation.

An Abbot of a monastery called in a monk who was prone to gossip. He told him to go on top of the monastery, tear open a pillow filled with feathers and dump it out into the breeze. When the monk returned indicating he had completed the task, the Abbot told him to go out and gather up all the feathers. The monk replied that it would be impossible. The abbot replied, so it is with gossip.

As followers of Jesus, kindness and compassion can moderate our comments, even if we feel a stern word needs to be used.

It's forest fire season. Things are tinder-dry in our society. Let's not set any fires.

~PB