

“THE TAMING OF OUR SPEECH”

Isaiah 50:4-9A; James 3:1-12

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I remember the first time I became consciously aware of the power of words. I was a college sophomore and was enrolled in English 29, the prerequisite for all other English classes. A semester of Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, and Donne. The class was infamous, a way of culling out those who were simply not literature material. You began by memorizing the prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English; and, legend went, things went downhill from there. Though I never would have admitted it, I actually enjoyed *The Canterbury Tales*, all those satirically drawn pilgrims. And then came Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In those days, I was not theologically inclined. If someone had told me what my future career would be, I would have just laughed at them. But that's beside the point. Back to Milton. I was a rabble rouser in those days: a feminist, a social activist. I would have said not in the least romantically inclined. So how could I explain that one October afternoon found me sitting on my bed crying over Adam's plight in Milton's story of the Fall. For those of you who never read Milton or have forgotten, in Milton's interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, the serpent tempts Eve, she eats the apple, and Adam, after much agonizing, decides to eat it as well - even though he knows it's wrong - because he chooses deliberately to cast his lot with Eve. He's not tempted to sin; he is above such things. But he chooses to stand with his wife in whatever consequences she will face. So there I was, reading, my brain saying to me: this is bad interpretation of scripture and sexist as all get out; and even while my brain was telling me all that, Milton's words moved me to tears. It was a powerful lesson. Words matter. How we choose them, how we say them matters. Words are powerful.

I thought of my moment with Milton as I read this morning's lesson from the letter of James. James is the stepchild of the epistolary literature. In any discussion of the canon, what documents to include in the New Testament, James was always a target of debate. James is not Paul or John or even Peter. He's not a theologian working out in principled elegance the meaning of the resurrection. James is a practical guy, more preacher than systematic theologian. It's wrong to say that James doesn't care about belief, because he does. But for James the litmus test of belief is action. You say you're a Christian. Show me what that means. Show me how that affects how you live every day. So the letter of James focuses not on Christian thought, but on Christian behavior, and pretty basic behavior at that. Those who would downplay the importance of James's contribution to Christian thought accuse him of being obvious. He speaks of hypocrisy, humility, honesty, serving the poor and vulnerable. Nothing we don't already know, nothing we haven't heard before.

But just because something is obvious doesn't mean it is unimportant or unworthy of reflection. James addresses close to 25 percent of his letter to the act of speaking, the words that come out of our mouths, what he calls the "taming of the tongue." James reminds us to be thoughtful and careful in what we say because our words have impact, and they reflect who we are. Now I doubt if that comes as an astonishing insight to any of us, but I'm probably not the only one here who can use a reminder about what it means to be thoughtful and careful in both public and private speech.

First, some thoughts about public speech. This is just one example. I could have picked out any number of others, but I was deeply disappointed when I saw excerpts from Pope Benedict's speech earlier this week.

Did you all see that? In one section, he quoted a 14th century Byzantine emperor speaking about Islam, saying, “Show me just what Mohammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman.” This was one five-second quote in a major address, and Pope Benedict states that his intention in his address was to increase the arena of civil discourse, to take steps away from violence and terrorism. I don’t doubt his intention. But I would question his choice to include these particular words that, whatever his intention, only served to further inflame and polarize Muslims and non-Muslims.

“Not many of you should become teachers,” writes James, “for those who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James understood the awful responsibility of those in authority, the power their words hold for good or ill. There is already too much of violence, hatred, and division around us. We all know it. And all the weapons and armies of the world will not stop or contain this kind of enmity and mistrust. What we need are more words, better words, the right kinds of words: careful words, thoughtful words, not puny or uncourageous, but measured to minimize conflict, not fan the flames. We need intelligence and insight, cultural knowledge and sensitivity, the ability to speak hard truths respectfully, the maturity to go for long-term gain rather than the buzz of a ten-second sound bite. It’s a lot to ask of the world’s leaders I know; but until we ask it, we will certainly not get it. And it is so important.

The world of public discourse is complex and challenging, and the temptation is just to linger there, to point out the deficiencies of others; but when James wrote his letter, he was probably not thinking of nation states and the clash of ideologies. He was concerned about the day to day conversation of ordinary Christians: the words they chose to speak to their children, their partners, work colleagues, fellow church members. In these small arenas, the words that all of us speak have their own kind of power. So world leaders are not the only ones who need to remember to be thoughtful about what they say.

So what do we all have to remind ourselves of? When I was at Harvard Divinity School, an institution that is deliberately plural and has planned for difference and conflict to be a normal part of daily life and the give and take of ideas, there were small signs posted in many classrooms and hallways. The signs read, “Is it necessary? Is it kind? Is it really what you want to say?” Simple rules of discourse agreed upon by students and faculty that run the gamut of faith traditions. After a while, the signs became almost invisible because you were so used to seeing them. But I can’t tell you how many times I began to speak, and one or more of those three questions flashed though my mind, and I either remained silent or chose my words more carefully.

Getting even more personal, Paul Axtell, a conversation specialist who has spent some time giving workshops at OSU - I know some of you, like me, have been to them - Axtell claims that our relationship with anyone is the last five conversations we have had with that person. Now I know that’s an oversimplification in a lot of ways, but it’s also a helpful guideline. It’s OK here for you to take a moment to think back on the last five conversations you’ve had with someone who matters to you. In those conversations, what was said? Did you let that person know what you appreciate about them? Did you discuss anything of substance? If there was conflict there, did you approach that conflict trying to create the safest possible space for the two of you to work things out? It’s so easy when we’re busy or tired or stressed or angry, especially when we’re with the people we care most about, to be lazy and undisciplined about what we say or how we say it. We forget to say important words about how much we value each other. We let petty irritations dominate the landscape of our feelings. And, of course, we all know that feeling in just one unguarded moment of brain lapse, putting of our foot in our mouth; and suddenly we’re

chewing on our ankle bones, conversationally speaking, when it could have been so easily avoided.

Our words matter, the ones we say and the ones we don't say, the words that hurt and the ones that heal. It doesn't matter that we've heard this before. It doesn't matter that in part of our brain we already know everything we need to know about how we should speak, what we should say. Most of us at least need to be reminded that when we speak of the power of words, it's not just of words in general we're talking about, but our particular words. James would tell us that what we say is an important part of how we act. And how we act is, in fact, the truest measure of what we believe. Thanks be to God. Amen.