

“SPEAKING OF FAITH”
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38
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I grew up in the neatly repressed 1950s, a time when neither I nor any of my friends would even think of arguing or speaking less than respectfully to an adult. It just went without saying. But in those days, children’s recreation tended to be far less structured and supervised than children now. We played all over the neighborhood, moving in a herd from one yard to another house, on our bikes to the other side of the block and back, picking up and losing neighborhood companions of a pretty wide age range as we went. When we were by ourselves, a lot was done and even more was said than would ever pass the adult censors today. Children can be amazingly cruel. With relish we told outright lies to get rid of children we didn’t want to play with. We referred to each other as “idiot,” “fatso,” “stupidhead,” “pizza face,” and one unfortunate neighborhood boy who we just called “Nose.” And those are just the names I feel comfortable repeating in church! But we were children. We had limited problem-solving skills and only rarely an adult referee. One could hope that despite our less-than-civil childhood behavior, we would grow into adults more capable of tempered speech and a higher level of discussion.

Like millions of Americans, last week I watched President Obama deliver his health care address to a joint session of Congress. And then I watched the “after-party,” what passes these days as news commentaries from MSNBC to Fox News and everything in between. I heard those who favor health care reform call the opposition “crackpots,” “morons,” “liars,” and “dangerous loons.” I heard those who would prefer to maintain the status quo call reformers “dangerous,” “Un-American,” “socialists,” “liars,” “murderers,” and “Nazis.” Seriously, I thought I had been transported back to the age of 10, to the backyard brawls and name-calling wars that were the staple of my childhood. Except these weren’t children, and this is what has come to pass for legitimate public speech over sober and important issues in our nation today.

From the letter of James, “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 with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” My brothers and sisters, this *still* ought not to be so. It seems that very little has changed in our communication skills over the past two thousand years. However, much has changed in our communication technology so that we are literally bombarded with this kind of public incivility and deliberate bending of the truth all the time. What’s concerning about it to me is that we’re beginning to consider this level of public discourse to be normal, just “the way things are.” My children are both in their 20s. They can’t imagine dispute about important ideas being carried on in any other way than through lies, half-truths, name-calling, and deliberate distortion. They’ve seen it in politics; they’ve seen it in religion. I’m told that more and more “debate” in university classrooms looks like this. So where does it end? In my most cynical moments, I find myself thinking that what will finally end us humans and our civilization is not global warming or nuclear weapons, but our lack of desire to discipline our speaking. Our very mouths are our most dangerous weapons of mass destruction.

But I am not so cynical all the time, and I have to believe that I have a lot of company out there who would also like to raise the level of discourse not just in politics, but in the variety of settings of our lives. I've found myself thinking a lot about the Letter of James this week what timing that this was the lectionary offering. I found myself wondering who James was writing to about the taming of the tongue and what was at stake. It's tricky, historically, because this letter is not one that scholars can neatly pin down in terms of author and place. We know that the letter was written to a community of Jewish Christians, and the letter seems to be contemporaneous with the apostle Paul's early work. There is some speculation that at least one of the issues over which the community is arguing is the inclusion of the Gentiles within the Christian community. That argument was explosive, less than cordial, based in what James calls "bitter envy and selfish ambition." The inclusion of Gentiles into what had been a Jewish sect: it was certainly as difficult, maybe even more unthinkable, than desegregation in the South in the 1950s. So we can believe that James was probably not exaggerating when he mused to his audience about how damaging immoderate speech could be. Tempers and passions would have run high, and I have no difficulty believing that in one breath, some might have praised God and cursed a whole group of those made in God's image.

The interesting fact is that in James's time, it really did not take long for Jewish and Gentile Christians to come together as one. Within a single generation, those who had stood steadfastly and often acrimoniously apart were able to make common cause as one community. You have to believe it didn't just happen spontaneously. It happened because everyone from church leaders to new converts schooled themselves to both speak and listen carefully, to find the common ground and faith that led them to see themselves as more alike than different. Because that's the problem. It's when we see others as more unlike us than like us that we can so easily dismiss them, demonize them, reduce them from the status of respectful opposition to wrongheaded crackpots. The problem becomes them, not their ideas. They are not like us; and therefore do not need to be treated with the basic respect due to those who are "like us." And the gulf between us grows greater and greater.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies; bless those who curse you." When Jesus spoke in this way, he was not speaking about insubstantial superficialities, but rather the hard work of human consideration: finding in ourselves respect, forbearance, and acknowledgment of our common personhood with all others, regardless of their beliefs and their feelings or actions towards us. This basic consideration includes the disciplined speech and listening that James calls us to this morning.

It is, in fact, an article of faith for those of us within the community of faith to do our part to learn, to practice, to promote this kind of measured speaking throughout our lives. And it's hard. There's a reason children need adult referees. Self-control is something most of us work at all our lives. And interestingly enough, the apostle Paul and the writer James, though they represent opposite theological poles within the early Christian community, one of their few points of agreement is that self-control is a core Christian virtue or aspiration. In relation to speech, when the thoughts in our heads come out of our mouths intemperately, it is good to remember that our words can later be apologized for or explained or spun or forgiven; however, they can never be unsaid. So it behooves us to think always: what is it we honestly want to communicate? How do we do it so it can best be heard and understood? How do we speak our truth respectfully,

truthfully and, if it is a hard truth, with as little hurt as possible, treating with integrity the full personhood of those to whom we are speaking even as we would want them to guard ours?

Families are the perfect place to practice these skills. This side of heaven, family life is never going to be without dissent or disagreement, long-nurtured grudges and differences of opinion. And in my experience, there's nothing like family to goad one past the self-control button straight to the explode button. Which means that family is an excellent venue to practice thoughtful speech between spouses or partners, among siblings, between parents and children.

And then there's this place: the church. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus asks the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Who do you and you and you say that Jesus is? And what does that mean for you as you live your lives? These are the substantive questions we ask ourselves and each other in this community, and the expectation of each of us here is that we will come to different answers that will shape our lives, our convictions, our actions in a variety of ways. That's what we are about in this community: not uniformity, but honest engagement with our faith and where it intersects our lives. It is my firm belief that in a Christian community there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that cannot and should not be discussed because it is too controversial, or too personal, or too far afield. If we commit ourselves always to speaking carefully and listening thoughtfully, there is nothing we cannot discuss, nothing we can't consider here in this community of faith. And that seems like a really good reminder here at the beginning of a new program year for us: both the possibility of what we can do and be and consider in this place, and also the commitment we make to each other in our life together: not that we will always agree, or that we will never challenge, but that we will always speak honestly, respectfully, carefully.

We should demand no less from ourselves; and we should expect and require no less from others in the public arena. The ability to speak is one of God's great gifts to us; so is the ability to differ in our thoughts, to debate ideas, to come respectfully to different conclusions. It is our responsibility then to use these gift wisely in ways that honor and create and build in all the communities in which we find ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.