

A Restless Evil Or A Tree Of Life?

(Jeremiah 9:1-9; Mark 8:27-38; James 3:3-11)

A Roman Catholic priest, an Episcopalian rector, a Presbyterian minister, and a Lutheran pastor regularly got together for lunch. On one such get-together, their conversation turned to "true confessions." The priest confessed to the other three clergymen that he was a compulsive gambler. The rector smiled and said that he had an obsession with attractive women. The minister hesitated, but then he admitted that he was an alcoholic. All three clergymen then turned to the Lutheran pastor and asked him what his problem was. "Well," he confessed, "I'm a compulsive gossip--and I can't wait to get out of here!"

Ah, the tongue! It's such a small organ, only weighing two ounces. But we mustn't let its size fool us. When we go to the doctor's office, one of the first things the doctor asks us to do is to stick out our tongue. The dentist carefully examines our tongue as well. The dentist and the doctor both know that our tongue can be a great indicator in determining our physical condition. And in our scriptures for today, it's clear that our tongue can also be a great indicator in determining our spiritual condition.

Thus the Bible is full of references about our tongues. One of God's 10 Commandments for us is to use our tongues wisely--to not bear false witness. In Ecclesiastes 3:7, we're warned there's "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." In the Book of Proverbs alone, we find almost 150 references to "tongue," "mouth," "lips," and "words;" that's roughly five times in each of the thirty-one chapters. In our epistle lesson for today, we're warned that the tongue is capable of great evil. The Letter of James says that the tongue can "stain the whole body." It can be "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." And, indeed, there are so very many ways that this is true.

One of the most obvious ways that we use our tongues for evil is when we lie and exaggerate. In our Older Testament lesson for today from Jeremiah, God says when we lie, we're bending our tongues like bows so that we can use our tongues to shoot forth words that destroy like deadly poison arrows. He says that he detests it when we speak friendly words to our neighbors, while all along, we're planning to lay an ambush for them. God is in anguish when

we tell falsehoods instead of truths, because when we do this, it shows that we are so far from him and his ways that we obviously don't know him at all--that we have no relationship with him at all. And this makes God torn between wanting to have nothing to do with us any more and wanting to punish us and bring retribution on us.

God is disgusted with our lies and exaggerations because they reflect poorly on him as our Heavenly Father, and also because they hurt his other children. When we use our tongues to spread rumors, to gossip, to slander others, when we make jokes at the expense of others, we do great harm to others. That little saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is so untrue.

In much the same way that a match can start a forest fire, so too a word spoken can take on a power of its own and soon get out of control and cause great destruction. In the 1600s in Salem, Massachusetts, the words, "she's a witch," spoken by a minister named Samuel Sewell, unleashed a fire of madness that resulted in numerous deaths. Words spoken by greedy men about slaves from Africa and native Americans later did the same. In the 20th century, millions of Jews suffered and died because Hitler and others called them "Christ killers." In fact, for every word in Hitler's book, Mein Kampf, 125 people died in World War II. After World War II, here in "the land of the free," how many lives were destroyed and what damage was done to our country when a senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy spoke those words, "he's a communist!" And now, in our time, we see talk show hosts doing the same thing--speaking words to incite others to fear and violence against certain groups of Americans. Yes, words can unleash a mad fire of senseless destruction.

Words are also used to target and destroy individual lives. Remember the story of the girl who lashed out at another girl when she didn't make the cheerleading squad? This angry girl started a rumor that the other girl who had made the squad was pregnant. Without investigating the truth, the principal removed the slandered girl from the cheering squad. And the embarrassed young girl committed suicide two days later. An autopsy revealed she was not carrying a child.

And often, the evil arrows we shoot with our tongues, cause ripples of evil. In other words, when we use our tongues to destroy others, we may end up even causing great harm we never imagined or intended. Perhaps you heard on the news about the Baptist minister in Arizona who preached a sermon two weeks ago entitled "Why I Hate Barack Obama." From the pulpit, he encouraged his parishioners to join him in going home and praying that God would kill the president. He explained, "I hope that God strikes Barack Obama with brain cancer so he can die like Ted Kennedy, and I hope it happens today." A member of his congregation, a man named Christopher Broughton, showed up at a rally outside the Phoenix Convention Center where President Obama was addressing veterans, and he brought an AR-15 assault rifle. When the media asked him what role his pastor's sermon had played in his decision to bring a gun to the rally, he had no response. Do you have any doubt about what God must think of this minister? Not only has he prayed that harm come to another of God's children, but also he's put thoughts of violence in the minds of others to whom he is to be modeling God and God's ways. Furthermore, that Baptist minister has done immense damage to all Christian churches, to Christianity itself, and to the Christ he professes to serve, for how many rational, good persons will want nothing to do with the faith, the church, and the God such a man of hate represents?

The tongue also does evil when it prevents others from doing the right thing. That's why when Peter used his tongue to try to keep Jesus from being true to God, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It seems that a 10-year-old child was diagnosed with peritonitis, and the doctor who had caringly and skillfully cared for the family for years advised an appendectomy. Two days before the child was to enter the hospital for the life-saving surgery, however, his mother heard some gossip about the doctor and as a result refused to follow through on the surgery. The child seemed better. So the parents didn't even consult another doctor. Months passed and then one night, the child started screaming. He was rushed to the hospital, but by then, it was too late. Nothing could be done for him, and he died. At the funeral, the woman who had gossiped confessed that what she had said about the doctor hadn't been true. The child died of peritonitis, a ruptured appendix, and a gossiping tongue that had prevented the parents from doing the right thing.

Oh, and there are so many other ways that the tongue does evil. When the tongue is used to brag, it sets up barriers between people. When the tongue is used for sarcasm, it inflicts stabbing pain. When the tongue is used for obscenity, it insults others and God himself. When the tongue is used to criticize or belittle, it abuses others. When the tongue never stops long enough to allow others to share, it prevents closeness. One can feel the resentment of the family of Arabella Young when we read the epitaph they put on her tombstone, along with her date of death. It reads: *Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young; who, on the twenty-fourth of May, began to hold her tongue.*

So many ways that the tongue can be indeed what the Bible says: "a restless evil, full of deadly poison," displeasing God, hurting others, hurting ourselves. It's enough to make us afraid to ever use our tongues again, isn't it? But wait! The Bible also refers to the tongue as "a tree of life."

And we know that this is true. The tongue can do the work of justice. Just think of the words that rolled off the tongue of Abraham Lincoln at the Gettysburg National Cemetery: "That government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln's words have inspired not only Americans but all people who seek freedom. And who will ever forget those eloquent words of Martin Luther King, Jr. during the March on Washington: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." King used his tongue in creation of a colorless society where people would live in harmony with one another.

The tongue can also calm those who are frightened. Proverbs 12:25 says, "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad." And so, consider Franklin Delano Roosevelt, telling the American people in the midst of the Great Depression, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." He went on to articulate his four freedoms: freedom of speech and worship, and freedom from want and fear. He called upon Americans to unite for the common cause and good of all. And think of Winston Churchill. It is said that his tongue was more powerful than all the rockets and bombs of Germany. After a devastating air raid, Churchill would get on the British

radio and speak such words as "Never in the course of history was so much owed by so many to so few."

The tongue can also give guidance. Consider John Kennedy, saying, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

The tongue can speak words of confession so that a broken relationship can be restored. The tongue can speak words of forgiveness that can heal. Proverbs 12:18 says, "Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword--but wisely spoken words can heal."

The tongue can ask questions to learn the truth. The tongue can speak words to instruct others so that their lives may be better.

The tongue can speak a word of welcome to a stranger...or a word of comfort to someone who is hurting...or a much needed word of encouragement to someone who is discouraged.

The tongue can tell a friend, "I'm here for you." The tongue can tell a spouse or a child, "I love you."

The tongue can pray. The tongue can bless. The tongue can praise God. As God showed us at Pentecost, the tongue can give witness to God. The decade of the 1660s in England was filled with disaster. The plague in 1665 made its way through London, leaving 70,000 dead. Then, a year later, a fire destroyed much of the city. The prophets of doom and gloom said that London would never recover. But a godly man named Thomas Ken used his tongue to speak up and witness to God. He spoke of a God of love who was with his people even in difficult times. One night he even wrote a song stating that God was still sovereign and worthy of praise. We continue to sing his words today: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures here below.*

Consider some of the ways Jesus' tongue was a tree of life. He used his tongue to teach his disciples about God; to teach us how to pray; to tell stories such as "The Prodigal Son" to make us aware of God's forgiveness and love; to show compassion to the widow of Nain; to build community; to encourage reconciliation; to congratulate Mary for her wisdom in choosing to

sit at his feet and listen; to tell the Pharisees how important practicing justice is; to give hope to the soldier whose servant was sick; to heal a hemorrhaging woman; to resurrect Lazarus; to forgive the woman caught in adultery; to give hope to the penitent thief on the cross.

So the Bible calls the tongue "a restless evil" and "a tree of life." Proverbs 18 states it another way, saying, "death and life are in the power of the tongue."

Without God in our lives, our tongues are likely to bring death. But with God in our lives, our tongues can be tamed and taught to bring life. That's why it's so important for us to do everything we can to grow close to God. When we regularly come to worship, Sunday school, and participate in a circle of ministry, we put ourselves in places where God's spirit can speak to us and guide us and help us use our tongues as Jesus did and as God wants us to.

And so, you see, our tongues are truly great indicators in determining our spiritual condition. Whether or not we are close to God will most likely be reflected in how we use our tongue.

There is probably no better way to close today's sermon than with Jesus' words as found in Matthew 12:36. Jesus says to us, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; September 13, 2009