

Tongues of Fire

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel we heard the account of our Lord tackling the problem of an especially troublesome and resilient demon. His disciples – whom Jesus had indeed given authority over unclean spirits – had tried to cast out this stubborn spirit from the poor lad who was so grievously afflicted by it, but they couldn't do it. Specifically, we're told they didn't have the faith to do the job. And it's clear that Jesus was disappointed in his disciples: "O faithless generation!" he says to them. "How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" It's obvious that he thought by now, after all they'd seen him do and after all he'd taught them, that they should've had the faith to manage even the most powerful evil spirit. But no; in the end, the boy's father had to go directly to Jesus to get the job done right. And later, when the disciples asked Jesus why they'd failed so miserably, he told them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" –which I hasten to add doesn't mean that they were to throw up their hands in hopeless defeat and say, "I'm afraid there's nothing left for us to do now but pray"; no, it means that divine help was available if only they'd thought to ask for it. The problem is that they tried to do it on their own, with their own spiritual strength and faculties. And when they failed, they panicked. They gave up. It never occurred to them – or rather, they didn't believe – that supernatural power to accomplish what was beyond them was theirs for the asking. And because they didn't believe, they didn't ask. That's why they failed. Because of their lack of faith in the Lord with whom all things are possible, they couldn't gain mastery over this difficult spiritual problem. But if they'd believed, well, then all things would have been possible.

That's the idea I want to carry forward as we examine today's Epistle lesson. In it St. James discusses yet another very difficult spiritual problem that all too often proves beyond the ability of Christ's followers to master. This one, however, is not a super-powerful demon, an unwelcome foreign entity exerting its external control over us; no, it's a part of our own bodies. He speaks of the human tongue and the momentous evil and vast devastation it can unleash.

And we know this true. I mean, who can doubt that a major cause of WWII, the most widespread and deadly conflict the world has ever known, was the ability of one man, Adolf Hitler, to move audiences with his powerful rhetoric. With his poison tongue he inspired a whole nation to immense evil that set the world aflame and resulted in the death of millions. But we don't have to look that far back into history. This past week we saw thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of Muslims moved to violence. They were supposedly protesting a YouTube video that insulted their prophet Mohammed. Never mind that 99.9% (or more) of them never saw this video. They would never even have heard of it if they had not been stirred up by the wild speeches of various radical imams who told them that they should be absolutely outraged by this egregious insult to their religion. They were told that faithfulness to their god, Allah, could only be shown by running amok in the streets, rioting, and denouncing the US as the great Satan. And their hearers thought, "What? We can prove our religious devotion by throwing rocks, burning things, and hurting people? Sounds like fun!" And off they went to do just that; their fury and violence a testimony to the amazing power of the tiny human tongue to do immense harm. It's small wonder that St. James calls the tongue a fire. It's like the campfire of careless camper that gets out of control and burns entire forests.

We experience this in our own lives as well. It's stunning how fast a vicious rumor can spread like a wildfire and utterly destroy a respectable reputation that took a lifetime to build.

And we know too the power of the little tongue to inflict pain. That old expression “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is a lie. I guarantee that there is not one person here who does not bear the scars of unkind words spoken in anger. And those old wounds still sting, don’t they? I’d wager too, that there’s no one here who wasn’t able to give as good as they got. You know very well that there are people out there whom you have wounded with your words. They are permanent casualties of your fiery tongue. Those words that continue to fester in old wounds can be forgiven; but they can never be withdrawn. The pain they cause will not go away – not in this life, anyway.

And that’s why it’s absolutely necessary that we keep careful watch over what comes out of our mouths. Learn to tame your tongue, James says, and you’ll be master over your whole body. Like the rudder of a ship or a bit in a horse’s mouth, if you can control your tongue, the rest of you will be sure to follow.

But that’s easier to say than it is to do, isn’t it? In fact, St. James says it’s impossible: “Every kind of wild beast has been tamed by mankind; but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” I dare say it’s like that demon which the disciples couldn’t control. But they couldn’t control it because they didn’t have the faith. They were relying on themselves. They weren’t praying to the Lord and looking to him to use his mighty power. And if we were to throw in the towel and say, “Look, like James says, there’s nothing I can do. I can’t control my tongue”, well, then Jesus has just one thing to say to us: “O faithless generation! How long am I to be with you? How long am I to put up with you?”

As followers of Christ, we *must* learn to control our tongues. We must learn to think before we speak. We must understand that our mouths are like guns. Once you pull the trigger, you cannot recall the round. It’s going to hit its target. It’s going to hurt somebody. It may even kill them. We must learn to control our tongues of fire. And it begins by recognizing that our tongues are beyond our own ability to master. We must humbly confess our lack of strength in this regard and turn to him who does have the strength – the one with whom nothing is impossible – fully believing that he will do for us what we cannot do ourselves.

With this in mind, we start with confession. Think about now the things you have said to people in anger and frustration. Think about the people you’ve hurt directly with your unkind words and the reputations you have helped destroy by passing on gossip – whether the scandalous information was true or false, it doesn’t make any difference. We’ve all done things we wouldn’t want others to talk about and spread around, and yet we’ve done it to others. Recognize now the people you have burned with your tongue of fire, and repent. Confess it to the Lord. And the Lord Jesus will forgive you. He died for those sins. And more than that, by his Spirit he gives you the faith to receive his forgiveness and the power to do what you cannot do on your own.

Next, to the extent that is possible, you need to confess the sins of your tongue to the people you’ve hurt. Tell them that you’re sorry. And don’t make excuses. What you did was wrong. It was mean. It was hateful. Tell them so. Tell them that you are without excuse. And ask for their forgiveness. And pray that the Lord will give them the ability to do it. You may not get what you ask for; but at least you’ve done what you can to reconcile. And it may be that your words of sorrow and humility will soften their hearts and ease their pain. Furthermore, in some cases it may be possible to do some reconstruction. If you’ve helped damage a reputation, there may be things you can say to others that will help restore it. To the best of your ability, do that.

And then comes the hardest part: learning to control what you say – or rather, learning to let the Spirit of God within you control what you say. That's the key. As a Christian, you have two natures: one redeemed, sanctified, and governed by the Spirit, which delights in God's good and holy will; and the other evil, self-centered, and destructive. Those two natures are both within you. So, when you want to say something, ask yourself first, "Which of my two natures is speaking?" "What's my motivation for saying this?" Is it to hurt someone? Is it to remind them of some old sin by which they hurt me? Is it to give me a sense of superiority or an unfair advantage in an argument? Is it a juicy bit of gossip that's just too good not to share?

If the motivation is in any way less than honorable, then you can be sure it's your fallen nature that wants to speak. And that's when you must strike. Before you open your mouth, see that hateful ugliness within and kill it. Confess it silently to the Lord. Receive again his forgiveness. Ask him to guide you. And he will. You don't have to ask, "What would Jesus do?" No, you already know what Jesus did. When reviled he did not fire back with angry words. When maliciously and falsely accused, he did not defend himself or attack those who were bearing false witness against him. He knew that a gentle answer turns away wrath. He knew that love bears all things, forgives all things, and covers a multitude of sins. He used his mouth to bless and not to curse people. And by his Spirit, he strengthens you to do the same.

That's the flip side of this whole thing. Just as fire when properly controlled can be used for good purposes like cooking, sterilizing, and purifying metals; so also our tongues of fire can be used for good. We can speak words that help to heal the hurt in this broken world. And we sin when we don't give the word of comfort or encouragement someone needs, when we withhold forgiveness from someone who asks for it, when we fail to give a word of warning to someone who's in danger or who has fallen into sin, and when we leave the words "I love you" unsaid. For these failures too, we need the Lord's forgiveness. And with it and his strength we will be equipped to use our tongues of fire for the good of others.

And thus far, I have been speaking almost exclusively about worldly matters – the way our tongues of fire can burn or bless others in this life. But we know that the Church of Jesus Christ of which we are all members is about much more than that. It's not merely about helping us to get along in the here and now; it's also about preparing us for the life to come. And that's where St. James begins in this morning's Epistle. The idea is this: in view of how difficult it is to control our tongues, and the untold damage that can be done to others through our speaking thoughtless or unkind words that only matter in this life, how much more do we need to guard and control what is said here in the Church where the Words of eternal life are spoken? If it's so easy to stumble into sin when speaking of earthly things, then how much more do we have to be careful when speaking of heavenly things?

This is why St. James says that not many should become teachers of God's Word. It is an awesome and frightful responsibility. It cannot be taken lightly. If any person's thoughtless words can hurt or even kill others, the misspoken or incorrect words of a preacher can send souls to an eternity in hell. Therefore those who take up the mantle of teaching in the Church will be judged with greater strictness. I would hate on the Last Day to be in the shoes of a man like Joseph Smith, who founded the Mormon faith which he built entirely on lies, and by which millions have been deceived; or Mohammed, the false prophet of Islam, who has led billions to destruction.

But the thing to see is that any false doctrine is potentially dangerous. All error and falsehood with respect to God's Word and the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes straight from the devil. It is meant by him to deceive and destroy souls. It's intended to take people away from

trust in Christ and in him alone. And it doesn't take much. If you introduce just a tiny bit of poison into a city's drinking water, it may not hurt most people. But it will hurt or kill those who are already on the edge, whose health is compromised, and whose constitutions are weak. And so it is with false doctrine in the Church. Even a few words aflame with error can cause some hearers to burn in hell. And don't think for a moment that doesn't give me cause for alarm. I, for one, know that I cannot do this job on my own. It's why I study a lot. It's why I begin my sermon preparation with prayer. It's why I always pray before entering the pulpit that God's Word will be properly heard and understood by you. And it's why I covet your prayers on my behalf: that the Lord through his Spirit will give me the words to speak, just as he did for the disciples on that first Pentecost when tongues of fire appeared over their heads enabling them to proclaim only the truth about Jesus Christ, his holy Word, and God's plan of salvation in him.

It's a heavy burden to bear. And in this congregation, it's not mine alone to carry. Obviously if you are teacher in the Lutheran School or a Sunday school teacher here, you too bear this responsibility. If you are a parent, then you are charged with teaching your children. The Lord calls you to lead your family in his way and the knowledge of his truth. If you are an officer of the church, then part of your job is ensuring that what is taught here, the hymns that are sung, and the way we conduct worship all conform to the truth of God's Word. And if anyone of us sees or hears false doctrine being taught by me or anyone else, it's your sacred duty to speak up to correct it.

And, of course, in a broader sense, we're all called to share Christ's Gospel when opportunities arise. Every one of us is potentially a teacher for someone who needs to hear the truth of Christ. And that means we all need to be prepared to give the reason for the hope that lies within us. So, when the Lord gives you such an opportunity, speak; but be careful what you say. And be even more careful what you don't say. Remember that mankind's first failure was Adam's. When Eve was being tempted, Adam, standing next to her, chose not to say anything. He held his tongue when circumstances demanded that he speak God's Word against Satan's lies. He could have said, "No, Dear, that's not what the Lord said. Listen to God rather than Satan." Imagine how much evil could have been prevented if only he had spoken up.

In the same way we can prevent evil and do great good by using our tongues of fire properly – for the purposes that the Lord intended. Relying on him, and not on our own abilities, we can use our tongues to bless others in time and for eternity, and we can use them to praise the Lord's holy name now and forevermore. May he give to each and every one of us such tongues of fire. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!