

Sixteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "Muzzle Me When Necessary, Lord!"
Psalm 116:1-9, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38
September 11-12, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A friend was tired of hearing co-workers tear apart others who weren't present, so he broke into their conversation and said, "You're killing me with the suspense! Just tell me straight out. What do you say about **me** when **I'm** not around??" That was gutsy. It reminded the gossipers they shouldn't be trash talking. It dared them to say to his face what they might be tempted to say behind his back. Our words would be sweeter and the world would be better if we would follow that rule of thumb: only say **about** someone what we're willing to say directly **to** them.

When I was in first grade and receiving Holy Communion for the first time, the Host was placed on my tongue. We were taught **never** to touch it. Then Vatican II rolled 'round and we were taught to cup our hands like a throne and allow the Host to be placed there. I remember one of my teachers sharing that some adults were worried by the change, because they were well aware our hands can be used to sin and therefore shouldn't be touching the Body of Christ, or so they thought. She made the point very clearly that we are more apt to sin with our mouths, by what we say, than with our hands, by what we do. And the point of Holy Communion is that our Lord comes to us sinners with the gift of mercy, forgiveness, rather than coming to us saints with a reward for righteousness.

The header for *The Message's* rewording of today's lesson from the Letter of James is "When You Open Your Mouth." Every time we open our mouth there's the potential for something good or something vile to come out. There's a fairy tale in which one character says nasty things accompanied by a torrent of toads and snakes, and the other one says

kind things, creating a waterfall of rubies and pearls. Maybe that visual can help us weigh our words more carefully, in a world where a lot of people aren't measuring their message at all, instead spewing forth profanity and streams of hurtful, damaging words.

About 2,000 years ago when James wrote, Christians, Jews, Romans, Greeks, despite their different religions, pretty much all agreed that the person who was wise weighed his words, held her tongue, used speech to build up not tear down. Earlier in this letter James previewed what we heard today:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.
(James 1:19)

Most of us instinctively put up an invisible protective force field when someone prefaces a comment, "You know I always tell it like it is." Because that's a red flag that whatever follows may be tactless at best, brutal at worst. What did we learn when we were little? "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." True, there are truths that need to be spoken that aren't always pleasant. But I like the 3 questions that Armand Gamache, Chief Inspector of Homicide in Louise Penny's Three Pine series, tells his investigators they should ask themselves before they say anything:

1. Is it true?
2. Is it kind?
3. Is it necessary?

I think that's a worthy lesson to teach our Sunday School children and Confirmation Connection youth.

Something else we learned as children was, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me!" It was meant to be an imaginary shield we could hold up to

ward off verbal attacks. Only problem is, we know it's not true. Words can leave scars as long-lasting and disfiguring as physical blows. The "F" word hurled at me when I was a child was "Fats!" I would reroute where I was going on my bike to avoid the kids who taunted me with it. It echoed in my mind for years. All of us can remember words that went deep like daggers (and may still be imbedded).

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue," says Proverbs 18:21. When honest with ourselves, we can admit that we, too, have spoken words that are unkind, leveled accusations that are untrue, piled on with unnecessary criticism, made fun of what others take very seriously. And so, "Muzzle me when necessary, Lord!" is a very helpful prayer to pray regularly. The more familiar words of that prayer are part of vespers, evening prayer:

*Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;
Keep watch over the door of my lips.
Psalm 141:3*

By Your grace, may it be rubies and pearls, not toads and snakes, that come forth!

That's for the sake of God's children and their feelings, but also for the sake of our witness to God and to our faith. If people experience us belching forth reptiles, how are they to connect with the loving God we profess? If our words leave scorched earth, why would others want to worship our God? As parents are sometimes judged by the behavior of their children, our God is judged by **our** behavior. James points out the contradiction:

With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! My friends, this can't go on. (James 3:9-10, The Message)

I truly believe that, overall, our children and youth are more attentive to what we do than what we say. But I also believe that what we say and how we say it are very important! I worry when I see photos of parents carrying placards with foul language or

read reporting of those who protest the mask mandates being disrespectful to elected and appointed officials. In Luther's explanation of the Fourth Commandment, he says we owe respect not just to our parents but to all those in authority. We teach our youth that "those in authority" include teachers, coaches, police, firefighters, physicians, and the list goes on. How do we teach our children **reverence for God** if we're not teaching them, by example, **respect for those in authority**? Corrie ten Boom has written, "Freedom is not the right to do what we want but the power to do what we ought."¹ Maybe we could amend that to say, "Freedom [of speech] is not the right to [say] what we want but the power to [say] what we ought."

Words have power.

God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

May our words shed light.

Words have power.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
(John 1:1)*

May our words witness to the Light of the World, the incarnate Word, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

¹Quoted on September 4 in *365 Inspirational Thoughts For Women By Women*.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham