***TAMING THE TONGUE***

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Texts: Psalm 34:11-14 and James 3:1-12

There is a too oft-repeated saying that goes something like this: “If you can do something, then do it. If you can’t do it, then teach.” Some would surely add, “And if you can’t teach, then preach.” That saying in its various forms has always rubbed me the wrong way. I am, after all, the son of a teacher and the grandson of a teacher and principal. I am married to a teacher and librarian who is one and the same person. I am the father of a college professor. I serve in a Presbyterian tradition in which ministers are called teaching elders, which makes me a teacher of sorts too. But the roots of my dissent from the suggestion that “those who can’t do something, teach” goes further back – to elementary school.

Fanetta Shaw was my teacher in both second and fourth grades. She was a tough but fair educator blessed with wry humor and a kind heart. She had a *passion* for teaching and *compassion* for those she taught. She was bright and capable, reminding nine-year-old me very much of my grandfather, in a grandmotherly sort of way. When she spoke, we listened. In all my years of formal education, graduate school included, no teacher had a greater impact on me than Mrs. Shaw. I never doubted that she could do whatever she wanted to do, and what she wanted to do – what she was called to do, what she excelled in doing – was teach. Perhaps you too have been blessed with such a teacher who like Mrs. Shaw was ***called*** to teach.

James Michener, the prolific writer and Swarthmore alum, was once invited by President Dwight Eisenhower to a dinner at the White House. He answered the president with these words:

*Dear Mr. President,*

*I received your invitation three days after I had agreed to speak a few words at a dinner honoring the wonderful high school teacher who taught me how to write. I know you will not miss me at your dinner, but she might at hers.*

To which President Eisenhower responded,

*In his lifetime a man lives under 15 or 16 presidents, but a really fine teacher comes into his life but rarely.*

James’ sermon to the early church is a word about those rare really fine teachers. At first glance, one might think James had a grudge against all teachers, for he writes: *“Not many of you should become teachers…”* This was not the passage quoted by Bill Terry and the CE team when recruiting Sunday School teachers last summer; I doubt that it has ever graced the cornerstone of any school, church or college education department. They are not really words of encouragement, though some might consider them sage wisdom: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters…”

I am reminded of the woman who asked the young minister, “Were you called into ministry or were you just poorly advised?” Are teachers, like preachers, called into teaching or are they just poorly advised? With all the demands placed upon teachers these days – do more for less pay with less flexibility and more criticism – one might well think that somewhere along the line they were poorly advised, but James speaks for being called. “Not many of you should become teachers,” he says. Why? “For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James hesitates to commend that his brothers and sisters teach, not because he disdains teaching, but because he holds it in such high regard. Like all teachers, a lot is expected of those who teach faith; James appreciates the life-changing impact that a good teacher can have upon those whom he or she teaches.

In the church I served in Richmond several of my seminary professors came to worship each week. I was often asked if preaching to those learned folks who were my former teachers made me nervous. I always figured that the professors were the ones who should be nervous. I knew what I was going to say. They didn’t, and while there would be grace and forgiveness for the young preacher’s rookie mistakes, those same mistakes might cause folks to wonder just what those professors had been teaching me.

That is James’ fear – just what is the teacher teaching? What is flowing from the teacher’s tongue to make a lasting impact upon those who are taught? It is not just the content James is concerned about. Teachers bear responsibility for what is said, but also for how they say it. I remember a seminary student who was criticized as being a poor candidate for ministry, not because of what he knew or did not know, but because he lacked all grace in how he said it. He was a pompous bully, or as Paul might phrase it in his great love hymn in Corinthians, he was a noisy gong and clanging cymbal, for his words lacked any spirit of love!

James’ primary concern for his brothers and sisters, and for us, is in what is said and how it is said which includes what we do. He is concerned about the taming of your tongue. Scripture has some harsh words for the tongue. It is described in various passages as a deadly arrow, a sharp sword, a restless evil. It is compared to a sharp razor or devouring fire. After hearing such comparisons, one might wonder whatever happened to: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” That may be the saying on the playground, but it seems to hold little merit on biblical grounds where the proverb contends: “A soft tongue can break bones.” Scriptural images of the unchecked tongue are of an instrument of vast destruction, wreaking havoc on the innocent objects of its assault.

The wounds inflicted by words often heal far more slowly than do the wounds inflicted by sticks and stones. Words can scar the heart and soul in places sticks and stones can never reach. Such are the scars of the child who is repeatedly told that she is no good; such are the wounds of siblings whose unforgiving words have separated them in stony silence; such are the cuts inflicted by brothers and sisters in Christ who find it hard to disagree without being disagreeable. Such are the injuries caused by the piercing words of an untamed tongue.

Some years ago I visited a woman whose husband had died years before; she was still angry with God for his death but refused to voice it because some well-meaning friend had told her a good Christian is never angry with God. So, she bottled up her feelings, kept silent and let the anger eat her up from within. It wasn’t until I reminded her that God was big enough to handle her anger without rejecting her, that she could give voice to her anger amid a flood of tears and find some relief from the anguish of her heart and soul. The wounds of words uttered by an untamed tongue are not just flesh wounds; they run deep. They scar not only those to whom they are spoken, but also the one speaking. As Frederick Buechner cautions:

*If there is poison in the words you are poisoned; if there is nourishment in the words, you are nourished; if there is beauty, you are made a little more beautiful. In Hebrew the word* ***dabhar*** *means both word and also deed. A word doesn’t really say something. It does something*.

James’ concern is for what your words ***do***. Do they build up or do they tear down? Do they bless or curse? Do they heal or poison? Do they nurture faith or destroy faith? If you build up others, you are built up. If you bless others, you are blessed. If you speak words of healing, you are healed. If you nurture faith, you may find your faith nurtured.

Can you tame your tongue? Can you speak no evil and remain silent when you have nothing good to say, and resist the urge to hurt others, and withhold the careless word that starts a fire burning out of control? We can tame animals (except for cats), but we can’t seem to tame our tongues. The same tongue that blesses God curses others; the same tongue that professes love for the Lord spews hate toward others. How do you tame a tongue that speaks faithful words in one breath and fickle words in the next?

“*Come, O children*,” says the psalmist, “*listen to me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.*” Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and is also the beginning of taming your tongue. If you fear the Lord then you may think twice about what you say before you say it. “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit,” says the psalmist. “Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” If you have nothing good to say, bite your tongue. Do good with what you say. If you fear the Lord, you may resist saying something you and God would regret, you may actually try to obey what God says about what you say and speak a more faithful word and follow God’s Word made flesh, for the One who is God’s Word made flesh showed us how to tame the tongue.

In his book *Where Faith Begins* Ellis Nelson notes, “Although we know God is the source of faith, we also know that God relies on human beings to communicate faith.”[[1]](#endnote-1) God relies on you and me to communicate faith, to tell the story, to speak the truth in love, to share the Good News in what we say, in how we say it, and in what we do. For, our words and our actions communicate our faith. God needs good communicators who are good teachers: teachers who fear the Lord, teachers who tame their tongues, teachers who do good, teachers who seek peace and pursue it, teachers who try to follow Jesus. God needs those teachers in classrooms and nurseries, in offices and homes, in shops and in clinics, and in the church. God needs teachers to communicate the faith to a world of students waiting for a good word. Some of those students may be your children or your neighbors, your clients or your patients, your friends or an enemy. They will learn from you, whether you intend it or not? What then will they learn? What will they learn from your tamed or untamed tongue?

Let them learn grace. Let them learn love. Let them learn blessing. Let them learn peace. Let them learn Jesus – from you! Amen

1. C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins*, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1971, p.19 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)