

WATCH YOUR TONGUE!
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Letter of James :1-18

I do not think that I have ever preached on the Letter of James here at St. Aidan's or spent more very much time on this Epistle for that matter. However his comments about speech and the dangers of an unbridled tongue certainly resonate with me right now. That kind of thing happens when you go on a silent retreat where nobody's tongue is wagging about anything for 7 days. Silence makes you much more sensitive to the noise that passes for intelligent conversation in today's world, especially in our political world. Returning and reconnecting was more of a shock than I imagined.

Now relax I am not going to be talking politics, but I want to offer some thoughts to all those out there claiming to be followers of a certain man of peace, harmony and justice who speak like they have never really read his words or those of his followers. And yes I sincerely believe that these tongues are doing a great deal of damage to the rest of the body.

Some background is important so to begin with, what is this Letter of James? The Letter of James is one of the later books adopted into the canon. Authorship is truly unknown but some think it is a disciple of James the brother of Jesus who was a leader in the Jerusalem church.

James does resemble what is known as a Wisdom writer. This is really not a letter even though it starts off with a greeting to the 12 tribes. There is no opening prayer or other pieces of a true letter of that period other than the initial greeting. In all likelihood it is a collection of sayings or points like much of the wisdom writers. However, it is exceptional as wisdom literature. Most wisdom literature is focused on individual behavior

James is concerned with morals, not manners. There is little concern with how to get along in society and to gain honor and position as in the writings of most wisdom writers. He is strictly writing about moral attitudes and behaviors. The letter is addressed to an intentional community not individuals. There is nothing about slaves and masters, children and parents but the letter is devoted to the church as a community The points are egalitarian instead of hierarchical., communitarian rather than individual

There is a link in this passage of intemperate speech and arrogance. Arrogance, the I have the full truth and only I have the full truth is at the root of much of the evil. This is especially true when we are speaking of God and the mysteries of faith.

One of the commentaries I read even used political advertising as an example of how the tongue can destroy community and I see that in the current political and church world. Communities are being polarized, driven farther apart rather than building up the country as a whole. It is all us against them. The only difference seems to be who is us and who is them.

Now hold onto to your hats because I'm going to do something most of you will not believe. I'm going to quote an editorial piece by Cal Thomas from this past week¹.

That leaves members of God's Kingdom with two options: Force their views on those who don't share them (which an objective observer might say failed during the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition days of the 1980s and the Prohibition era before that), or accept the biblical verdict for that other kingdom: "And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever." (1 John 2:17 NLT)

And what, you might ask, pleases God the most? It is the sharing of His salvation message with members of that other kingdom, which has the additional benefit for those who accept it of changing their outlook on some of those very things most Christians believe. In other words, changed hearts are usually followed by changed minds.

We can engage in discussions about areas in which people of faith can have legitimate opposing views. I saw that this summer at General Convention: This was different this year. The vitriol was not there surrounding a couple areas not the least of which was the votes on the changes to the marriage services and canons.

Ultimately this is where I want to go with this sermon. We need to be careful about how we speak about God, faith and those mysteries that make up our faith. We need to be careful to avoid the arrogance that is so easy and so human. As a preacher I must always be aware that in a sermon I am trying my best to speak God's word as I have understood it. That also means I need to be aware that I will not always be right. Theology evolves and each of us whether we want to admit it or not have developed a theology. We all have an image of God whether we know it or not and often it comes out in words. Sadly the image of God as reflected in the speech of many people is one of a vengeful, mean spirited, angry God.

So what image of God comes out of your mouth? Is it an image that invites people or scares them? Does it welcome or exclude?

What the death of my mother in law a few weeks ago brings to mind is one area that people do not think about what their tongue can do. At one time I had a list from

¹ <http://hamptonroads.com/2015/09/thomas-two-kingdoms-conflict-samesex-marriage>

somewhere of 10 things to never say to a person suffering or in mourning and that starts with, "It was God's will." God does not will suffering at least not the God I believe in. In fact God as portrayed by so many people does not resemble the God I know and if that is how God acts than I don't blame many who have walked away from faith.

Others statements include, God needed another voice in his angel choir. They must have done something to earn all that suffering. Don't be sad she or he is in a better place. Well that may be true, but the person mourning is still going to grieve and I am careful to say that at every funeral I preach at. Or one that is very personal right now was, I hope she gets better. Well sometimes the only better is death, which is the ultimate healing. Ultimately sometimes the best thing to say to someone who is grieving or in pain is nothing. Just be there for them.

You see the tongue can do harm in many situations and we do see it every day. Our call as Christians is to pay attention to what our tongues and our actions say about God, Christ and the kingdom of God.

Ask yourself before you open your mouth especially in matters of religion several questions.

What image of God do my words create?

Do my words promote the kingdom that Jesus promised?

How would I feel if someone said this to me if I were in their situation?

Most important of all, is this something that Jesus would say or that I would be happy to stand in front of Jesus and repeat?