

“Hold Your Tongues”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ September 15, 2024

James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

Picabo [pronounced “peek-a-boo”] Street, the well-known Olympic gold medalist is more than a famous skier from a few years back. In fact, between training on the slopes and traveling around the world to compete, she managed to get an education and earn a degree in nursing. Early in her nursing career, she was assigned briefly to work as an ICU nurse in a large metropolitan hospital.

She did outstanding work. But there was a problem. The head of nursing had to tell her not to answer the phone in ICU because of the confusion it caused when callers would be connected to ICU and hear: “Picabo, ICU.”

True story? No way.

Picabo is not now a nurse, has never been a nurse, and doesn’t particularly want to be a nurse.

But she gets the joke. Since she was a child, she’s been teased about her name. Her parents got it from an Idaho town that takes its name from a Native American word meaning “shining waters.”

Since the advent of the Internet, we don’t have to tell these stories, but can write them down. And they travel at the speed of light. I can’t tell you how often I hear what is called an urban legend from folks. It sounds true. It is passed on to everyone in your address book and then on theirs and so forth until it goes around the globe several times in the blink of an eye. Some of these stories are very innocent and others are a bit vicious. They are rumors but passed through a more modern medium.

Picabo has a problem, and so do we: We cannot resist the temptation to spread a good story, whether it is true or not. In our text, we learn that:

“the tongue is a fire,”

- it can set an entire forest ablaze (3:5-6),
- it’s dangerous and destructive,
- its power is far greater than its size,
- it’s like a tiny rudder that can guide a huge ship,

- it's like a small bridle that controls the movement of a large horse

Never underestimate the power of this particular body part.

Of course, we know this. We've seen what happens to the standing of an elementary school boy when he is labeled a thief. Or to the reputation of a middle school girl when she is said to be sexually active. Or to the college prospects of a high schooler when he is rumored to be a cheater. Or to the promotion chances of a worker when she is said to be lazy or stupid.

We are seeing it now as one Presidential candidate is doubling down and telling the world that Hattian Immigrants are eating pets in Springfield Ohio. The town, the governor and many others are telling us that it is not true. But the story is continuing to grow. Now there are bomb threats at the schools there. More state police are sent there to help protect the citizens of the town all because of one person spreading a myth that will soon become a full-blown urban legend.

It hardly matters whether these stories are true or not. If they are disseminated, they do damage. There was a rumor going around recently about a popular hip-hop artist. The story was that she would rather suffer the death of her firstborn child than have a white person buy one of her albums.

It's not true. And yet, the story spreads the stain of racism.

"No one can tame the tongue," says James, it is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (v. 8). Did you hear about the kid who ate six bags of Pop Rocks at a party? His name was John Gilchrist, the actor who played "Little Mikey" in television commercials for Life cereal. He ate six bags of Pop Rocks, drank a six-pack of Pepsi, and the two substances combined in his stomach and exploded, killing him horribly. That's why Pop Rocks were taken off the market in the early 1980s.

The truth is that John Gilchrist never exploded. Pop Rocks plus soda produces only a burp. But the makers of Pop Rocks had to work hard to squelch the rumor, even writing to school principals. The same sort of corporate action had to be taken by the company Procter & Gamble, when it was accused of having links to Satanism.

The irony of this situation is that the tongue can do great good, but also great evil. "with it we bless the lord and father," says James, "and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. from the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (vv. 9-10). With our speech we can certainly bless people and

encourage them and strengthen them and build them up. But we can also curse them and discourage them and weaken them and break them down.

We do the most damage through the spreading of gossip. And if you've ever been a victim, you know how devastating this is.

The tricky thing about gossip is that it is often spread with what appears to be good intentions. A story about a neighbor is told to protect others from making the neighbor's mistake. A tale about a troublesome child is spread to keep other children in line. A personal concern is disseminated throughout the community because people want to show that they care.

The challenge for us, as Christians, is to show our concern by speaking directly to particular people, not by talking about them. If an action by a pastor troubles you, make an appointment and share your concerns. If a neighbor blunders badly, extend a hand and help to pick her up. If a child begins a downward spiral, step in and see if you can be a stabilizing influence. If you hear about a personal tragedy, pick up the phone and make a personal connection.

Any of these actions will do more good than spreading a story. And if you can't muster the courage to take one of these steps, then keep your mouth shut. As James says in the first chapter of his letter, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (1:26, NIV).

There is a great Christian virtue in simply holding your tongue.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that there was a special ministry to be performed in holding one's tongue. "Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively," he wrote, "if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words." Bonhoeffer discovered that if we hold our tongues and control our gossip about other people, then we come to discover that everyone has a place in the community — strong and weak, wise and foolish, gifted and ungifted. In the end, we realize that each member of the community has been made in the image of Christ, and that each person has a place to offer a particular form of service.

This great spiritual awakening begins with a simple step: keeping our mouths shut.

The challenge for us is:

- to bless people through truth-telling, not curse them through storytelling
- to speak directly to them, not speak to others about them.

I want to charge each one of you that if you ever hear another member speak an unkind word of criticism or slander against anyone, then stop that person in mid-sentence and say, “Excuse me – who hurt you? Who ignored you? Who slighted you? Was it the pastor? Let’s go to his office right now. He’ll apologize to you and then we’ll pray together so God can restore peace to this body. But we won’t let you talk critically about people who aren’t here to defend themselves.

I am serious about this. I want you to help resolve this kind of thing immediately. And know this: If you are ever the one doing the loose talking, we’ll confront you. What destroys churches is not crack cocaine, government oppression, or even lack of funds. Rather it’s gossip and slander that grieves the Holy Spirit.

My Grandmother was always quick to come up with a way to make this very relevant when she would say, God created you with 2 ears and 1 mouth. He meant that you should listen twice as much as you talk. That may be good advice for us all. Listen twice as much to your neighbor than you talk. Amen.