

## **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Sermon Text:** James 3:1-12

**Theme:** *“The power of speech”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Words contain great power. They convey our ideas, our desires, our emotions. Words convey who we are and how we see ourselves in the world and in our relationships with one another, and with God.

But now if I was to say that I love you, how would you react? Some of you might be pleased, some might blush, some (particularly manly, blokey types) might be very uncomfortable. The very power of speech also means that we have to be careful with how we use words for they can be easily misunderstood. The message, “I love you” will have a very different meaning between Sonja and I, than between myself and you as a congregation. They might sound the same, yet the meaning is very different.

Our readings today share the power of speech and God’s warning for us to control our tongues, to watch how we use words so we bear a good witness to Christ’s saving work. The very real danger is that we use our tongues to tear people down, rather than build up the body of Christ on earth.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

### **Misusing God’s gift**

The gift of language was given to people by God. In the beginning there was only one language and so everyone could speak to one another and at least be understood, if not also misunderstood. Because people could communicate their ideas easily, it allowed for big plans to be drawn up. After the flood through which Noah and his family were saved, the world was once more populated as God intended. But instead of being satisfied with their lot in life, the people decided to build a tower up towards the heavens so they could make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4). It seems they weren’t happy with the name God had given them, so they tried to create their own importance, their own destiny. So with the gift of one language, the people were able to communicate their grand designs and they worked together to build their tower.

Now God peered down from the heavens to look at this large, but insignificant tower and he realised that with one language, this was only the beginning of what they might try to do. So God confused their language, scattering the people all over the face of the earth. The people had misused the gift that God had given them, they had misused the power of speech to try and build themselves up, rather than to give glory to God’s grace and his plans to build them up in his name.

James letter, from which today’s New Testament reading comes, gives a great warning against misusing the gift of speech. He personalises this for each of us by his talk of ‘taming the tongue’. James begins with the sobering message that not many of us should be teachers, and here he is referring to teachers of God’s Word. The message is that those who teach others will be judged with greater strictness. God has called pastors through his church to serve as under-shepherds of *His* flock and if they are poor shepherds, then the flock will suffer. Our use of words, and our instruction of others, especially in a public forum, should reflect a careful use of the speech, the words we have been given to use. Lazy or careless words can all too easily be misinterpreted and cause hurt instead of restoration.

To add weight to James’ idea that our words need to be used carefully, he uses the descriptions of both the guiding of a horse, or the steering of a ship. Now I admire those who can confidently handle a horse. Whilst I can appreciate the beauty of a good looking horse, up close I find them intimidating. They are so much bigger than I am, they are so much more powerful than I and I quiver at the thought of getting stomped on. We have close family friends who have two daughters who love horses. These seemingly tiny young ladies are quick to control their horses with ease in a way that amazes me. Of course they use a bridle and bit to control these great animals. The gentle application of a small amount of force is enough to steer these horses to go exactly where the girls want them. Such a small thing controls the whole animal.

The other example James’ uses is that of the rudder on a ship. In a very similar manner, a relatively small part of the ship controls the whole ship in the direction the captain wants it to go. On Friday morning my dad left Cairns to sail to PNG, before sailing on to Micronesia, then on to Guam. With scarcely a care in the world, he will be sailing his 40’ boat across the great expanse of ocean, with rudders barely more than 1’ providing the steering in and out of ports, anchorages, and away from storms, reefs, and perils.

If such a small rudder, or such a small bit, can control much larger things, doesn't it make sense that our small tongues wield so much control over our whole person? The danger that James warns against is that we boast of great things. Like the people of the Old Testament, we risk trying to make a name for ourselves instead of being satisfied that God has already called us by name. The temptation is so strong to make claims of what you are going to do instead of letting your words and your actions speak for themselves.

James doesn't mince his words when he describes the damage a wayward tongue can inflict. In the midst of his descriptive language, perhaps the key lies in his observation that with the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, but we then are prepared with the same tongue to curse other people who are also made in the likeness of God. James gives words to what so many people describe as being that which they don't like about the church. And that is so many people come across as hypocrites. On the one hand they talk the talk about believing in God, following his commandments for their daily lives, and yet these same people can still be so quick to spew the most awful comments out about other people.

We need to be careful here because we are all capable of speaking against others. We do so when we engage in gossip about others we know; when we retell the stories told about our favourite celebrities in the gossip magazines; when we fail to speak in favour of those who have been wronged through the misuse of speech. The 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment is "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour". Luther reminds us that we should, "fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbour, betray them, slander them, or hurt their reputation, but *defend them, speak well of them, and explain every thing in the kindest possible way.*"

### **Using the power of speech for good**

Luther shifts the power of speech from the negative, firmly into the positive territory of using words to build up the whole body of Christ so we all gain. Now we are using this small part of our individual bodies to not only guide us as individuals, but to guide the whole body of Christ according to God's will. God's Word tames your tongue so you are given the power to confess faith in Christ, you are given the power to forgive the sins of those who have sinned against you, you are given the power to heal others who are hurting by bringing them God's words of grace and forgiveness.

Isaiah writes, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary" (Is 50:4). It is interesting that Isaiah uses words which are inclusive rather than exclusive. "Those who are taught" suggest strongly that many are taught God's words in order that they might be able to support others. Isn't this what happens within our own congregations? Aren't many people taught God's Word through Sunday School, confirmation study, by reading God's Word and by hearing God's Word preached for this time and place? God is giving you the power of speech to be used for the good of others as you build up and support them in their journey of life. How different this looks from using the same power of speech to tear people down through hurtful gossip or careless comments that hurt rather than heal.

The apostle Peter once again takes centre stage for all the right and wrong reasons. With his tongue he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Christ, the promised one from God. Yet in almost the very next sentence, Jesus is berating Peter for his words, for Peter is setting his mind on the things of this world, rather than trusting in God's plan for saving the whole world, not just those in one time and place. The power of speech can easily be used for good or for evil. Whilst Peter erred, it was Jesus who had the last word as he restored Peter with the commission to "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:17).

May Jesus have the last word in your lives as he commissions you to use the power of speech to bring his healing word of grace and peace into the lives of those around you.

Amen.