

Good Gossip James 3:1-12

The date was April 27, 2011. It was a Wednesday, and I remember that night as clearly as if it had been yesterday. Gary Reese sat down next to me at choir rehearsal and was more animated than usual. It was clear he had something he wanted to share with me. He said, "There's this new show on TV and it's great! You've gotta watch it."

He was talking about a new show that appeared the night before called "The Voice" - a vocal talent show that keeps the judges in the dark, so to speak requiring them to judge all the contestants based solely on the quality of their singing voice. The judges' backs are turned and they never see the performer.

Power, poise, presence, emotion, education, excitement — it all has to be conveyed to the judges only by the sound of the voice — not by any see-me-showmanship. The power to convince, convict, and control is not in the contestant's hands, but in their tongue.

The power of the tongue was of central concern to James in today's epistle text. And what power the tongue has. Did you know the tongue can lift up to 80 times its own weight, and is considered to be one of the strongest muscles in the body?

When read aloud, James' words create a reverberating reminder of just how influential, and how potentially damaging, the sound of one voice can be within a community. James begins by cautioning his readers that not many of them should aim to be "teachers" — that is, leaders who expound via verbal images and stories what the kingdom of God is called to be, in front of the whole community of faith.

Only those who have managed to "bridle" their own tongues, to voluntarily put a bit in their own mouths, turning control of themselves over wholly to another master: only those individuals should take up the title of "teacher."

"Teachers," however they are defined by the title, are those whose voices resonate and influence far beyond themselves.

- Gang leaders who live the creed of violence and cruelty as the only way to garner authority and respect, are "teachers."

- Adolf Hitler was a "teacher" for a generation of embittered Europeans.

- Osama Bin Laden was a "teacher" for a generation of embittered middle-Easterners.

- Eric Harris and Dylan Kiebold, the Columbine High School shooters, were "teachers" for all the other school tragedies that followed after 1999.

But "badness" is not really the focus of James' text. It's the power of the tongue — the power of the persuasiveness that our words wield, that James wants to confront his audience with.

Is there anyone here today who hasn't felt bombarded by that "power" over the past few weeks, assaulting our eardrums every day? Debates, debacles, and declarations of

all kinds are all at deafening decibels, be it about masks, shots, global warming, troop withdrawal, you name it. There is an increase of ugliness all over the airwaves.

“Free speech” is one of the “hallowed” hallmarks of our political system. It is the basis upon which open debate rests and wrestles. But speech that is purposefully hurtful and divisive, laced with enmity and animosity, is not “free.” It costs us greatly. Words that are woven together in order to smear, spear and skewer do not build up the kingdom.

They inject what James calls “deadly poison” into the world and work against the witness of God’s love for all. Whether the words are “red” or “blue,” vicious verbal attacks leave our souls with a black eye and our communal bodies with a bruised heart.

Every year just prior to election time all the major candidates virtuously declare they abhor negative campaigning and will certainly never start any mudslinging. And every year the sniping and snapping, the name-calling and nay-saying seems to get worse.

Candidates use tongue-lashing tactics because pollsters and number crunchers at their campaign headquarters tell them “negative ads work.” People love to watch and listen to tongues that taut the worst, tirades that tear down the other, testimonies to the atrocities of the opponent. Bad news sells big.

This week’s James text challenges Christians of all political leanings to think about the toll such speech takes on the body of Christ. In fact, if James were writing this epistle in 2021, he might challenge Christians to start a new mantra: “Negative Ads Don’t ‘Work For Me.”

A monstrous tongue sets fire to the spirit of love that is the distinguishing heart of a Christ-body community. Cheering on “tongues” that drip with “deadly poisons” does not benefit any political agenda. Neither “red” nor “blue” wins, and our mission to act as a radically new proponent of God’s kingdom loses.

The power of the tongue cuts both ways. Christians should cultivate a reputation for having wagging tongues, for being the greatest “gossip hounds” in their communities. The body of Christ should be telling tales all over town. But the tattling we should be telling should be good gossip — not bad.

When was the last time you “told” on someone who unexpectedly offered some gracious act on your behalf?

- What if instead of wailing about the rude driver who cut you off you witnessed about the teen who held the door open at the market for an older patron?
- Why don’t you add to the water-cooler scuttlebutt by mentioning how many times a colleague has cleaned out the coffee pot and made a fresh pot and never said a word?
- What if instead of wagging a finger at the soccer coach or bus driver you thanked them for what they were offering to the community?
- Instead of complaining about the weather, why not call attention to the beauty of God’s creation in this world?

“Good gossip” is what the Body of Christ is called to pass around. We are the community charged with ushering in the Kingdom of God, not grouching and grumbling about the state of the world.

Christians don't need to argue endlessly over whether life is better or worse, whether the glass is “half empty” or “half full.” Christians just need to drink out of the fat end of the firehose hooked up to the Living Fountain and gulp great amounts of the water of life that renews and sustains no matter what happens in this world.

Our tongues should proclaim only the “good news,” the gospel, for that surely is (or at least should be) the reality guiding our lives.

The French painter Emile Renouf (1845-94) painted a marvelous picture in 1881 called “The Helping Hand.” It depicts an old fisherman seated in a boat with a little girl beside him, perhaps his granddaughter, both their hands on a huge oar.

The old fisherman looks on the little girl fondly and admiringly. It appears as though he asked her help row the boat, and from her face it appears as though she thinks she's doing much of the work. But you can also tell from the fisherman's strong, muscular arms he is the one propelling the boat through the waves.

God grants us the favor of the oars, the grace of propelling the ship of Zion through the high seas of the world, the privilege of mission in a world where people are dying and drowning. But we must never forget who is really the one at the oars. We cannot perform our mission on our own strength, but only as God works in and through us.

When we forget the source of our power, we grow faint and get weary. We must remember that the “Voice” we speak must echo The Voice of Christ. We must be “on fire” for God rather than allowing our tongues to set fires of destruction and devastation.

Because if our tongue is set ablaze by hell, heaven help us. But if our tongue is set on fire by the Holy Spirit of Heaven, the gates of hell will tremble.

I end this sermon with two stories of two different dogs. The first dog's name is Shep - a faithful sheepdog who waited 6 years at a train station for his dead master to return.

The dog's vigil began in 1936 when Shep watched baggage men load the casket carrying his master, a shepherd, onto a train. From then until Shep died, the dog met each of the four daily Great Northern Railway passenger trains that arrived in this central Montana town called Fort Benton, hoping his master would be on the train.

The station employees took care of Shep, nicknamed “Forever Faithful,” and he lived in and around the station, becoming well known to everyone who passed through. The vigil ended in 1942 when Shep's paws, which were on the track to feel the vibrations of the arriving train, slipped and Shep fell beneath the arriving train.

A bronze sculpture of Shep, with his front paws on the rail, was unveiled in Fort Benton in 1994. Here's a picture of the statue of Shep now permanently holding vigil at the Fort Benton train station.

The second dog story is that of Scheop, a dog Wisconsin resident John Unger as an 8-month puppy. In the picture Scheop is now 19 years old and has arthritis so bad that

the dog has trouble sleeping. So every night John Unger takes his hurting dog in his arms, walks into Lake Superior, and lulls him to sleep by cradling him in his arms.

A photographer friend of Unger's decided to capture the relationship between the man and dog down by the water and posted on her Facebook wall. Here's the picture of the two of them, John rocking Scheop to sleep in the warm, buoyant waters of Lake Superior... The look on the dog's face says it all. And the look on John Unger's face.

That's exactly what James is telling Christians this morning: Don't pull each other down, cradle each other with compassion and forgiveness. In a world of nastiness and negative ads — why can't we treat each other this way?