

FIRST READING — Proverbs 1:20-33

Divine Wisdom personified as a woman tells of the discipline she has to offer to the willing listener and the calamity which will befall the one who refuses to heed her counsel. The phrase "the fear of the Lord" occurs frequently throughout the whole book. Reverence for God and God's will would be a modern way of saying the same thing. It is written . . .

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.

At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?

Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.

Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,

and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof,

I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,

when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.

Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.

Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord,

would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof,

therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.

For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them;

but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

SECOND READING — James 3:1-12

This sermonette is unconnected to what goes before or what follows. But it undoubtedly bears a direct relation to the unstated background out of which it arose. Were some of the teachers in the Christian community letting their tongues lash their listeners? If so, James addresses that problem. The rest of the passage consists of a series of metaphors for a careless tongue and how it may be controlled to everyone's benefit. It is written . . .

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be called to a stricter account. After all, each of us falls from time to time. However, those who never say anything wrong are truly close to perfection, because they can then control every part of themselves. Once we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. The same with ships: no matter how large they are, and even if they are driven by fierce winds, they are directed by a very small rudder to wherever the captain wants to go. The tongue is like that. It is a small part of the body, yet it makes great boasts. See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze! The tongue is such a flame. Among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a whole wicked world in itself. It infects the whole body. Its flames encircle our course from birth, and its fire is kindled by hell. All kinds of animals—birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea—can be tamed by us, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. We use it to say, "Praised be our God and Creator"; then we use it to curse each other—we who are created in the image of God. Blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. My sisters and brothers, this should not be. Does a spring emit both pure water and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, produce olives, or can a grapevine produce figs? No, and neither can a fountain produce both salt water and fresh water.

GOSPEL— Mark 8:27-38

Jesus revealed his messiahship to the disciples on foreign territory. Caesarea Philippi, at one of three sources of the Jordan River, was a vacation spa built by Philip, son of Herod the Great. Also foreign to Jewish religious thought was the idea of a crucified Messiah. Jesus rebuked Peter who tried to dissuade Jesus from such a course. It is written . . .

Jesus went on with the disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the

prophets." And Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Christ." And Jesus charged them to tell no one. And Jesus began to teach them that the Promised One must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Jesus said all this plainly. And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at the disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind on human things and not on God." Jesus called the crowd with the disciples, and said to them, "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who would save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what advantage is it to gain the whole world and forfeit one's life? For what shall one give in return for one's life? For whoever in this faithless and corrupt generation is ashamed of me and of my words will find, in turn, that the Promised One and the holy angels will be ashamed of that person, when all stand before our God in glory."

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer. Amen

The first thing I want everybody to do is stick out your tongue. Now look around at all these lovely examples of what is sometimes erroneously called "the strongest muscle in the body." Or what James calls "a small part of the body" like a tiny spark that can set a forest ablaze. (If you're reading or listening to this at home, go and stick your tongue out at yourself in a mirror.) It's not a pretty sight, is it? Although it is better than what a friend of mine did when she grossed out her confirmation class by passing around a cow's tongue to illustrate this lesson. As rude as sticking your tongue out at someone is, what is worse is using it as a verbal weapon. The old saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is just not true. Words can have great power. And James addresses this truth when he says, "See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze! The tongue is such a flame."

This letter of James is an interesting and often overlooked piece of work. It's not like other New Testament epistles, certainly not like Paul's letters that lay out specific Christian doctrine. James instead is interested in practical matters of community harmony and integrity. In fact, James is more often compared with Wisdom literature, a genre of writing that Israel shared with surrounding cultures and which appeals to human experience in general, words to the wise about how to live--in the home, in the work place, and in society.

So it is appropriate for it to be paired with a reading from the Book of Proverbs, which begins with its purpose: "For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young." How fitting then to read these texts today as we come back together a new school year begins, a new start for Kids' Time. James obviously recognized the importance of education and the special calling of those who teach: "Not many of you should become teachers, for you know that we who teach will be called to a stricter account." This reading reminds us that the words of a teacher touch the soul and, because they reach the vulnerable places of the heart, have potential both to heal and to hurt. Remember the words of Isaiah: "God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word."? But in spite of the seriousness and specialness of the teaching vocation, it is the purpose of Lady Wisdom, the Divine Sophia, to call us all -- as individuals and a community--to seek the wise path, to see things differently from that which so often pervades our everyday experience and our thinking. And so this matter of the tongue. As someone put it: "The wise community talks the walk."

I don't think anyone should need convincing about the harmful potential of language. Is there anyone who has not had the experience of being both on the giving and receiving ends of a thoughtless remark or an angry tirade, a tasteless joke or an unkind comment? Last week we even heard Jesus give a tongue lashing to the Syro-Phoenician woman, and referring to her and her people as dogs. So we've all been there, and this is hardly anything new.

So we might take the lesson from James as a reminder to keep a civil tongue in our heads, to refrain from gossiping, to remember Martin Luther's own wisdom teaching about the meaning of the 8th Commandment (you shall not bear false witness): "We should not deceitfully belie, betray, slander, or defame our neighbors, but defend and speak well of them, and put the best construction on everything." Words of wisdom for us to live by. But what about when others do not live by these words of wisdom?

What do we do when talk is toxic, when the tongues of others are filled with deadly poison? For instance: no matter what your political affiliation or opinion about the current health care proposals, I think we'd have to agree that the condition of civil discourse has been taking a severe beating. "See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze!" It was a mere two words ("You lie!") that set off a political conflagration this past week. From disruptive town hall meetings to outright lies propagated on TV, radio, and Internet--the good gift of human speech has been used to create fear, manipulate the valid concerns that people have, and even give a forum to those who wish for harm to come to our president. And frankly, many of those who oppose these tactics are just as obnoxious. Ed Schultz, the left's counterpart to Rush Limbaugh, rants in the same bloviating, confrontational way. They go back and forth--bashing and demonizing each other. It would be funny if it weren't so symptomatic of what we have come to expect of public discourse. One side yells at the other; the other side yells back. And the people who are affected by the decisions being made are caught in the middle. As James would say, "My sisters and brothers, this should not be!"

But what can we do? Even James despairs: "We can tame all kinds of animals, but no one can tame the tongue." Fortunately, he also recognizes that the same tongue that says spiteful and hurtful things also praises God and cares for the neighbor. So the practical meaning we can take from it is that we should use the power of speech to express gratitude to God – and to use it to heal and build and strengthen community. We see many examples of how we fail to do that. But here's a positive one:

A voting member at the ECLA Churchwide Assembly posted a story and picture on a blog about a Pastor X, who had spoken vehemently against the resolution to change the policy concerning lgbt clergy, and because of some of his remarks had become known as the "new poster boy for hate speech." The blogger wrote: I'm a voting member who voted in favor of all the resolutions for blessing and ordaining lgbt people in committed relationships. I was seated about 6 people away from X on the assembly floor, though I don't know him personally. I did not agree with pretty much anything of what he was saying from the floor, and there were several times when I was down right p-d off by him. In fact, I found it rather hard to talk to him. But I want to share a story that someone shared with me.

One of the other voting members is a gay Lutheran man who has been married for 20 years and with his spouse and their children have found a loving home in an ELCA congregation. He had spoken passionately several times on the assembly floor about his family, about the pain he has experienced, and the rejection of the church of which he is still a part. This man is a regular reader of this blog, and he spotted this photo and comments as soon as they were posted. While I, a straight white male, had trouble talking to X, this man did not. When he saw this photo, he quickly saw himself in his brother's shoes. He went up to X and let him know that he was the "New Poster Boy for Hate Speech" on the blog. "Have you ever gotten hate mail before?" he asked X. With a shocked look on his face X shook his head no. "Well, I have. And let me tell you, it sucks. But I will walk with you, and help you through it." The blogger ends: "The transforming power of Jesus speaks the truth when it is hard, and calls Christians to cross into unknown territory for the sake of love of the neighbor. Pay attention for quiet Christian voices that are whispering words of reconciliation to one another."

Now that is a wise man. And that is the kind of language that we want and need to hear more of, not just in the church arena, but in the political arena as well. It's the kind of language that we need to demand of our leaders, as well as ourselves. It is altogether too easy to rant and rave about what is wrong with (insert your favorite topic). And it is tempting to listen to the pundits we agree with and delight in their ability to zing the other side. We enjoy being in the choir they're preaching to.

But we have to ask ourselves whether this kind of speech is helping to bring about community harmony and faithful integrity, whether this is the path of wisdom. And if it is not, if it is toxic talk, then we must demand better. Our voices must be raised – not in like manner, not in hostility, not in threats, in lies or slander – but in truth. We can't sit quietly by as terrible words of racism and hatred create an atmosphere of violence. We have to counteract toxic language, such as the pastor calling the death of abortion provider George Tiller an answer to prayer and saying that he is also praying imprecatory prayer (asking God to bring misfortune and death to one's enemies) against the President Obama.

The man who brought an assault rifle and a handgun to an Obama event in Arizona, had heard a sermon the day before, in which the pastor said he was going to "pray for Barack Obama to die and go to hell." It doesn't matter what your politics are, that is not acceptable. These words are a danger to the community. But the same tongue that says spiteful and hurtful things also praises God and cares for the neighbor. And the first thing to do is include in our spoken prayers each week, prayers for the safety of our president and his family. And then we also look for ways to be the leaven of gracious language, of civil discourse, of wisdom – to be a community that talks the walk.

The opportunities for us to speak out in some way can be as unexpected and unrehearsed as the man at the synod assembly found. What a fine example of heeding the words of Jesus: "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Who knows what his courageous act may bring into the difficult days ahead as members of the ELCA sort out their differences? As our country sorts out its differences? As we walk the talk and talk the walk of Jesus, our wisdom teacher, may we continually pray with the Psalmist:

Let the words of my mouth
And the thoughts of my heart
Find favor before you,
O God, my redeemer and rock.

Amen