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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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Only Christ Can Tame the Tongue

James 3:1-12

INI

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places; who has chosen us before the foundations of the world that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. Amen.

It leaves you wondering, how did things get so out of control? Its one of those situations on the playground where the tension builds and builds until one girl says, "I guess you don't want to be my friend any more." Its one of those situations at home where the tension builds and builds until one spouse says, "I guess you don't love me anymore." Its one of those situations at church where the tension builds and builds until someone says to the pastor, "I guess I'll come back when you're not pastor here anymore." And you wonder, how did things get this far? How did we let things get so out of control? Is there anything I could have done to change this? To calm the tension?

But who can tame the tongue? It is an unruly evil; it is full of deadly poison. And so, in our text, James gives us a stern warning of the unruly, destructive nature of the sinful tongue. No man can tame it. No man. And that is why it will take more than a man. It will take a God to accomplish this. For as Jesus said in our Gospel reading, all things are possible to him who believes. Although Christ is not mentioned, he is the unspoken word behind all that is being said. It is Christ alone who can do what no man is able to do – only Christ can tame the tongue. We'll look at what it is that is stirring behind our untamable talk. We'll see how it escalates like wild fire in our lives. And well take it to Christ and his cross which alone is able to forgive and rule our tongue.

James 3:1–12

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. ²For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. ³Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. ⁴Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. ⁵Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. ⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.

This word of the Lord was spoken for you.

We pray, let the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

1. What is that is stirring behind our untamable talk?

Psychology Today refers to it as “undercover anger.” It is probably more well known as “passive aggressive behavior.” There are some who are blatantly aggressive – who say what they mean and mean what they say. When they are angry, they let you know. But I think as Christians, there is a more subtle temptation that we fall victim to far more than we would like to realize. And it is in this area that words can do much more damage than we realize. Lets take a look at what is stirring behind it all.

The Mayo Clinic defines passive aggressive behavior as a pattern of indirectly expressing negative feelings instead of openly addressing them. Rather than talking about how he really feels, the person instead cloaks his meaning in carefully chosen words; often stirring up conflict or pain for the other person. In an article published by the Washington Post they identify seven signs that you’re being passive aggressive. It may show itself when your co-worker talks about the new house they just purchased and you say, “We would like to get a new house, but haven’t been able to because we give all our extra money to church.” It may show itself when the newly engaged friend shows you her ring and you say, “I thought it would be bigger.” It may show itself when someone is talking to you, you pull out your phone and start texting someone else. It may show itself when you accept a responsibility that you really are not committed to and then when it doesn’t get done, you make excuses or pretend you didn’t know. It may show itself when you gossip or talk badly about someone who did something to hurt you.

The point is, that behind your words, something is stirring. You choose words in such a way as to free yourself from responsibility, but and leave the other person carrying the burden. It is the anger, the jealousy, the brooding revenge that we clothe in carefully chosen and sometimes not so carefully chosen words; words designed to sting or leave a person feeling guilty or allow a person to fall into a bad situation. And it is not just anger that we cover up. It is pain and sadness that we cover up too. Clothed in words of indifference or emptiness or coldness. It is pride that we cover up, or more likely, insecurity. We parade it about in untactful words, in put downs and puff ups. What it is ultimately – is undercover sin; so unruly; so anxious to hide itself and yet also to show itself.

So James warns us – not many should become teachers. Not many should take on the responsibility of teaching others, if they have not first learned to be students themselves. And we all do it; we all stumble in our words; we could have been more tactful; more patient; more silent. That is why we need a bridle.

It is like a horse who if he is left to himself will be wild, domineering, not listening to anyone. We need bits in our mouths; something to bring us into subjection. There is much going on behind our words that is in need of taming. But it is hidden from us. It is like a ship's rudder that remains hidden under the water, and while the wind is so fierce and the ship is so large, it is just a small plank that directs its course. So hidden behind our words is our tongue, and hidden in our tongue is the intent of our heart – it directs the course of our whole life. How little it is, how hidden it is, but how great are its boasts! Behind our words there is something stirring, something directing us – and it is a course we cannot remain on. If allowed to kindle, it will spread like wild fire.

2. How does it spread like wildfire in our lives?

See how large a forest is set afire by just a small fire.

It began with just a small fire; they were just talking about clothes on the playground. She was excited to show her friends her new backpack that her parents got her; but when she did, one of the girls laughed. That's a little kids backpack. My parents let me shop for my own stuff at the mall. And the tension builds and builds until one girl says, "I guess you don't want to be my friend any more."

It began with just a small fire; they were just talking about the coming weekend. He had been planning to go over to his friends this Sunday to watch the game. But she says, "If you loved me, you would want to spend more time with me." But she is

thinking about more than just football. Last Sunday he went to watch the game too; only it was also her birthday. Its been three days now and he still hasn't said a thing. And neither has she. And all of a sudden, the flame is fanned. Words are flying and its spreading. And the tension builds and builds until one spouse says, "I guess you don't love me anymore."

It began with just a small fire; a pastor sent an email to one of his teenage members. In many not so tactful words, he sends an email explaining how things ought to be. He gets to the point, but in harsh and abrasive words. Back and forth they go. Those words that we throw around the digital world, distancing ourselves from any person to person responsibility. And the tension builds and builds until someone says to the pastor, "I guess I'll come back when you're not pastor here anymore."

See how large a forest is burned down by just a small fire. It is like those wildfires in Washington. We are in high alert, where just a small match, if not extinguished, will endanger all around us. And that match is set on fire by hell. Hell is behind it all. Clothed in gossip; cloaked in put downs and puffed ups; covered up in silence – hell is on fire with the lies and slander of the devil. And he is determined to spread this fire. It begins within us, born in our flesh, hidden within – anger, jealousy, bitterness, complaints, pride, pain, insecurity – it is in us and if not uncovered, it will spread and grow, until no man will be able to tame it or put it out. It will burn bridges that cannot be repaired. No man can tame the tongue.

Except for one. There is one man who can tame the tongue. But he is more than just a man. He is also God. Only Christ can tame the tongue.

3. Only Christ Can Tame the Tongue

It is one of those situations where the tension builds and builds until God says, "I guess you really do love me." The tension was building. Tension between Christ and those who hate him. The antagonistic words were hurled at him. Clothed him in a purple robe, hidden under a crown of thorns, covered in the silence of the cross is God's own Son, hated by all those he came to love.

There was an undercover anger that was pursuing Jesus all the way to the cross. It was driving the course of the world: in anger, jealousy, pride, insecurities – it burned with the hatred of hell and it was uncovered on the cross. On the cross Jesus demonstrated passive acceptance. He accepted our sins, passively and obediently. we hear him speaking through Isaiah from the cross, "I gave My back to those who struck me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard, I did not hide my face from

shame and spitting, For the Lord God will help Me; therefore i will not be disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint.” He passively accepted it, so that God would respond, “I guess you do love me.”

And he for those whose tongues are tired of talking. We are tired. Tired of the words we have spoken, the relationships we have damaged, the feelings that have been hurt – your tongue is tired. You cannot come up with the right words to fix this. To make things right with God. You cannot take back what has been spoken. You have blessed and cursed – from the very same mouth.

Only Christ can tame the tongue. And he so says, “The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know he to speak a word in season to him who is weary.” He speaks a word to you who are weary. He touches your tongue, and cleanses it with his blessing. He forgives you of all your sins. He frees you from the desperate efforts to cure yourself or keep yourself from stumbling. He remakes you in his likeness and stirs up something new within you.

He says in John 7, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” (John 7:38) No spring brings forth fresh water and bitter water. And what Jesus has stirred up in the waters of baptism is an everlasting fountain, springing up and gushing forth to put out the fires. To water all that is around you. And in Christ, you are a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body.

When you are talking to your friends on the playground and someone says something mean, let Christ do the talking. When you are talking to your spouse at home and you’ve been hurt and it is bothering you, let Christ do the talking. When you are talking with fellow Christians in an email or at a church meeting and someone has been untactful or even malicious, let Christ do the talking; for he has learned to speak a word to him who is weary. And that is the word we need. A word of rebuke. A word of forgiveness. A word of kindness. To govern, bridle, rule our tongue. Only Christ can do it.

*Oh, that I Had a Thousand Voices
To praise my God with thousand tongues!
My heart, which in the Lord rejoices,
Would then proclaim in grateful songs
To all, wherever I might be,
What great things God hath done for me. Amen.*