

“Hearts and Tongues Afire”
September 17, 2006

Isaiah 50:4-9a
James 3:1-12

I realize that you all – you who are this church – have called me as preacher, teacher, and pastor. So you have called me, among other things, to take this (the Bible), this (the newspaper), and this (the congregation), and then try to make sense of it all. You have called me to try to name and share the presence and blessing of a God of unending mercy, love, and forgiveness. But even though that’s what you’ve called me to do, I want to start this morning by *shirking* that call and asking you how *you* make sense of it all.

My specific question is how do *you* react to today’s second reading? How do you feel, what do you think, when you hear and read the words from the Letter of James? What do these words *do* to you: The tongue is placed in our bodies as a world of iniquity; it is a stain, set on fire by hell. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

So what do you make of our brother James in this passage?

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For me, when this passage is joined in the lectionary readings with the passage from Isaiah that Sandy read a few minutes ago – “God has given me the tongue of a teacher, so I may know how to sustain the weary with the word” – I experience serious spiritual whiplash. Which is the true story? Is the tongue something that makes it possible to sustain the weary, or an evil filled with poison? A source of sustenance – or a source of poison? A blessing or a curse? I think we might all agree that the answer is, it’s *both*. The tongue and its capacity for speech, like every other human ability and characteristic, can be build up and tear down. The tongue can bring healing and hope, but it can also wound and degrade.

So I don’t have a quarrel with James’ caution about the tongue’s destructive powers, but his description *still* strikes me as a little extreme – iniquity, stain, hell, evil, deadly poison. I’ve been imagining sitting down with James and asking him, “Brother, just who did what sort of dirt to you, through gossip or insults or some other kind of words? What happened to set *you* so on fire in your warnings about tongues on fire?” But as I continued to imagine a conversation with James, that question started to seem too superficial, too personalized. Instead, I felt drawn into asking about what I call the “big lies” of his time and place, so that we might hear what God is trying to tell us about the big lies of *our* time and place. In other words, in the first century empire of Rome and the 21st century empire of the United States, what are the sweeping lies that diminish life, that deny the power of love, and that divide us from one another and from God?

From what we believe we know of James and the realities of life for him and the communities to which he was writing, the lies were powerful – and often deadly. The Empire proclaimed that the Emperor was not simply *blessed* by the gods, but was *himself* a god, who was to be worshipped and obeyed without question. It proclaimed that its pursuit of war and conquest was in fact a pathway to *peace* and that execution and inhumane incarceration were necessary for the public good. The lies that surrounded and assaulted James and the other early Christians also included the notion that among all

people, the few were meant to live in luxury while the many lacked sufficient food and shelter, as well as the notion that the economic exploitation of one people by another had divine sanction.

In light of those first century realities, James' stinging words about the tongue no longer seem so harsh to me. The tongue that explicitly or implicitly utters these lies is indeed full of poison, the kind of poison that kills body and soul. With love for both God and the communities to whom he was writing, James was passionately and truthfully warning them about the destructive power of the untruthful tongue.

Across the centuries, James is trying to warn us, too. He is warning us not to believe or to utter the public lies that are the direct descendants of the lies of his own time – that violence and raw power can ever bring true peace, that punishment alone can ever bring true justice. The lies that some human beings are literally worth more than others and that those “others” are expendable if they stand in the way of profit or power.

So I no longer think that James' description of the tongue is over the top, over the edge, simply *too much*. What a heart on fire with a love for God and for God's creation, James calls out and truthfully names the destructive power of untruth.

But, of course, that's not the whole story. Even James acknowledges that blessing comes from mouths that also curse, and Isaiah describes the tongue as an instrument of sustenance and life. Tongues that speak words of love, forgiveness, and hope can convey God's grace and can open us to the miracle and mystery of God's work in our lives and our world. Tongues that utter words of loving truth to someone who is dying the ugly death of addiction can be an invitation back into life and truth. Tongues that bring laughter can begin the healing of a broken heart.

So, my brothers and sisters, that brings us to this simple question: how do *we* use our tongues? Are they on fire with scorn for our political opponents, hatred for those who seek to do us harm, impatience with friends and family members, or suspicion toward anyone who is “too different”? Or are our tongues *and hearts* on fire with love and with the conviction that God will show us the paths to take if we listen and wait patiently? Are our hearts and tongues on fire with awe and reverence in the face of the very gift of life? Are they on fire with the faith that every single thing we do in genuine love truly *matters*, even when the “thing” we do seems trivial and insignificant in a world that needs so much love and so much healing?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells a story of finding himself moved to speak words of truth, even though he didn't know what words would come from his own tongue. His story is a reminder of the ways God uses us to bless – and challenge – one another with our words.

Several years ago, much to his surprise, Rabbi Kushner had been chosen as a member of the jury for a drug case. He described the defendant as someone who looked down and out, someone whose life was going nowhere. The charges against him included not only possession, but also the more serious charge of trafficking, because the police had found the defendant, a small amount of cocaine, and another person in the defendant's apartment. The prosecutor argued that the defendant was guilty of both possession *and* trafficking because the charge of “trafficking” included simply “giving” cocaine to someone else.

The rabbi and a few other members of the jury didn't believe that the defendant was guilty of trafficking within the true meaning of the statute. In good rabbinical

fashion, Rabbi Kushner worked with the words of the charges against the defendant and, over time, he convinced the rest of the jury that although the defendant had given his friend some cocaine, it was more accurate to conclude that he had *shared* it, not *trafficked* it. And so the jury convicted the defendant of possession but acquitted him on the charge of drug trafficking. The judge then sentenced him to time served.

As Rabbi Kushner and the other members of the jury left the court room, he saw the defendant and his lawyer standing at the elevator. Kushner writes that he felt himself propelled toward the defendant, and his words came from his tongue seemingly of their own accord. Looking the young man steadily in the eyes, the rabbi said, “Very few people get a genuine second chance in life. Don’t waste what we worked hard to give you today.” And then he walked away, led by the same God of forgiveness and justice who had led him to speak a word of sacred truth to begin with.

It doesn’t take rabbinical – or ministerial – training to be open to the God who calls us to speak a word of love, justice, and peace. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., all it takes is a heart full of love and a soul generated by grace. All it takes is a heart and a tongue on fire with the love we have received from our creating, redeeming, and sustaining God. All it takes is that simple and daunting act of surrendering our whole selves to the God who has called us into life and love.

At the end of each day, when we think about what we’ve said and done, do we find that our words and deeds told the people we’ve encountered, that they are beloved of God? And just as important, at the end of the day and throughout the day, do we know that *we* are beloved of God? If our tongues speak the truth that all of creation is beloved of God, we become a blessing for the world and ourselves. But if they speak the untruth that some people or some parts of God’s creation are less beloved than others, we become a curse.

Here, in this congregation, God’s truth has poured in, and we have proclaimed the truth of God’s extravagant, unending welcome. Let us always listen for that truth, and then try to live it with our tongues and hearts on fire with love.

Amen.

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