

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.*

The Untamable Tongue - September 12, 2021

James 3:1-12

Words, words, words. Nowadays, it seems that we are being inundated with an avalanche of words. No matter where we turn, words, unstoppable words, are bubbling out of everywhere.

Just about all of us have access to the great blessing and enormous curse called the internet. The internet is both a blessing and a curse because it can be a source of valuable information, a means of communicating with our friends and families, a fountain of entertainment by means of books, videos, and music. The internet provides many things which can enrich our lives tremendously.

At the same time, the internet is unstoppable. Like the floods that ravaged our region last week, the torrent of emails, Facebook posts, videos, music, Twitter tweets, just never stops. On my computer alone, I have access to literally hundreds of entertainment channels. I can access news feeds from all over the world. The inboxes of my email accounts fill up daily with everything from greetings from my sister to advertisements for shirts, to requests for me to contribute to this or that fund. I don't know about you but the sheer stream of information pouring into my computer, my phone, my tablet, is incessant and unstoppable. I find it difficult to prune the stream to allow me to see only the things I want or need to see. Inevitably, if I try to limit what comes to my attention, I will inadvertently eliminate news or people or information or entertainment that I want to see. You can't stop a flood by using a bucket, you just have to wait for the water to subside.

The problem with the internet, of course, is that it never subsides, ever. In fact, the tide of words just increases more and more and more. No human being can possibly process the words and media gushing at us every day.

Young people are amazed that when I was their age, not terribly long ago, we only had 4 TV channels to watch. We got our news mostly through newspapers and magazines hand delivered to our homes containing stories of events that happened not minutes, not hours, but even days before! If I couldn't watch 4 TV channels back then, how could I possibly watch 4000 now?

Moreover, even if I could somehow watch more video channels, read more emails, listen to more podcasts and music, how can I possibly think and reflect and analyze what is pouring into my beleaguered brain?

It can't be done. It just can't be done. The internet, certainly created with benign intentions, has become an uncontrollable monster devouring us with torrents of words produced by millions and billions of people.

Millions and billions of tongues.

Back when today's passage from the letter of James was written, the human tongue was virtually the only instrument of human communication. Yes, there was writing, but few could read. Moreover, there was no way to reproduce written words in a way that would permit many people to access them at the same time. No, the tongue ruled completely and back then our brains were fed and filled by only a few tongues: those of our families and friends, and perhaps the tongues of priests and soldiers repeating the words of others. Few sources, right? More manageable right? Safer, right?

Wrong. Today's scripture points out the difficulties inherent in all forms of communications: whether the source of the communication is the direct speech of one person or a post on Facebook, or the comments of a politicians repeated endlessly. The result is the same. Communications relayed in ignorance or put forth in malice are capable of unleashing powerful evil.

James in his letter exclaims, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire."

The tongue is a fire. It was a fire two thousand years ago. It is a fire today. Except nowadays we are not just influenced by human tongues, but printed words and audio recordings and ubiquitous videos. All these are forms of tongues. Yet, regardless of the form by which the words are presented, they are all in their own ways, fires. Fires with a capacity of setting great forests ablaze.

Friends, this is the world in which we are living, a world ablaze in so many ways.

Just look, for example, at the debates surrounding mask-wearing and vaccinations ravaging our country. Right now, when the vast majority of the world is craving access to the COVID vaccines, millions of our fellow Americans are adamantly refusing to get them. At a time when 1000 Americans die needlessly every day from COVID and the infection rate of children under 12 is spiking, we continue to resist wearing masks and supposedly "keep searching for more evidence."

Obviously as one who has been vaccinated and wears masks at my school and in most businesses, I am biased. Nevertheless tongues are fueling this debate. Tongues of pro-vaxxers and anti-vaxxers alike. Anger, even hatred is driving much of what is going on.

And chaos reigns. And people die.

What is fueling this chaos? Why are these blazes set by so many tongues unquenchable? How, when, will it ever stop?

To be honest, the cauldron of hate speech and deliberate misinformation is, I believe, going to be with us for a long time to come. The problem with the millions of internet and other tongues unleashed on

the world is that proclaiming false, hateful, and misleading ideas is now a huge industry. Lying is big business and many are getting rich spreading lies and hatred.

Obviously, these tongues would not be getting rich if no one bought into their lies and twisted ideas, so there are those who are happy to pay directly or indirectly via the incessant ads on Facebook to hear the garbage spewed by so many. Nowadays, anything goes, all speech is permissible, and facts are all optional.

When James was writing two thousand years ago, he very much sensed the danger hateful speech brought to the world. He marveled at the fact that while the tongue is a very small organ of the body, it is truly the most powerful. It is the most powerful in its ability to do damage to the world.

But, we must remember with hope that the tongue also has equal or even greater power to help and heal. And that, for Christians, is what we can cling to going forward.

It is easy, far too easy, to give up and retreat from the cacophony of lies in which we are immersed. But we don't have to! Through faith, through our knowledge of Jesus Christ, in our walk with the Lord, we are equipped to wade through the evil and emerge stronger for it.

Friends, in Christ we have a way to separate the wheat, that is the good and useful things we see and hear online, from the chaff, the garbage that seeks to burst our computers and our smartphone screens. And that way, quite simply, is the way of love.

In our hearts, in our minds, in our spirits, we have the capacity to separate the two and it is the rule of love that can and should guide us.

There is no such thing as a magic filter that will somehow strain the internet to present us with only the content we want to see and need to see. Yes, there are indeed some things that we may not want to know but we have to know, like it or not.

Indeed, there is no magic filter that will filter information for us, but as Christians, we can do it for ourselves. When we are presented with new content of any kind: an email, a website, a Facebook post, a show, or a piece of music, the only question that matters is whether that content is presented in a spirit of love. It sounds simple, maybe even naive, but is it?

Ask yourself not whether you agree or disagree with the content but how the content is being presented. I frankly am disgusted at the incessant derogatory, accusatory tone that pours out of so many posts. The tone of so much on the internet focusses on tearing down, not building up.

Such is not what the Realm of God is about.

While James in his letter reminds us of and laments the power of the tongue to hurt and destroy, we cannot forget, and must actively promote the power of the tongue to build up, restore, and heal.

Friends, the essence of our Christian message is love, is it not? Look at the chaos, destruction, and hatred blasting us like an out of control firehose from all corners of the internet. Internet, what am I saying? Not just the internet, but every corner of life!

Sometimes, quite frankly, I feel utterly helpless in the face of all the negativity swirling around us. I hardly need remind you that yesterday we remembered the 20th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center and other sites on September 11, 2001. In many ways the fountains of hate in the world and in our own country were exacerbated by what happened on that terrible, terrible day.

So what does all this mean for us as the church of Jesus Christ? The cross is our response — our simple, paradoxical, nonsensical, irrational response.

On the cross, a man died, a totally innocent man died. He died for the crime of standing for love and equality and inclusivity and community in a world that was dedicated to destroying these ideals. All Jesus did was speak truth to power and seek to heal and transform the least, the last, and the lost. And because his message so aggrieved the establishment of his day, he died.

And that would have been the end of the story except God took a hand in it. As Christians, we believe that death did not have the final word. The cross stands empty, the tomb is open, Christ is risen because his message of love and equality and inclusivity and community is what the world was created by God to be. Jesus defeated death as proof that love is the only way forward.

As followers of Jesus Christ, therefore, our tongues cannot be silent. This church has to stand for something. We exist not as just another support system for each other but to use our voices, as few as they are, to assert that there is a different way of living and being. A better way of living and being. A way that liberates us from enslavement to hatred and prejudice and the morass of negativity in which we find ourselves today.

Let us resolve, my friends, let us resolve to use our tongues, our very human, very imperfect tongues, to be instruments to proclaim God's steadfast love for the world. Let us strive, each in our own way, to rid the world of this unprecedented abuse of human communications as sadly embodied in the internet. Let us instead follow in the way of Jesus and use our lives to celebrate and glorify all that is good and right and positive about humanity and therefore purge ourselves of despair.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.