

Proper 19B – Is your tongue an instrument of death or life?

1. On this weekend when we remember the tragedy that was 9/11 and all of the changes that have occurred in our society, I am amazed when I look back at how different our society is than it was 20 years ago.
  - a. I remember the morning of 9/11 very well, in Balt as NY it was a beautiful, crisp morning not a cloud in the sky
    - i. I was on my way to the hospital, and I heard the report that one tower had been hit by some kind of aircraft – they didn't even know what kind yet
    - ii. Then by the end of the day as that horror unfolded, we were transfixed by the images of suffering and death and true heroism that left an indelible image for most of us
    - iii. We remember that event with a mix of sorrow for those lost and admiration for the heroism of those who risked their lives and those who gave their lives on that fateful day.
  - b. In the intervening years the changes that I have observed have been monumental – unimaginable before 9/11 but all-too-normal now
    - i. Checking into the airport long before your flight to go through security
    - ii. Living in a country that has been on a wartime footing for nearly a quarter of a century
    - iii. And I think a tribalism that at first was meant to identify enemy from ally, “us” vs “them” (there has been a continually changing stream of them over 20 years)
    - iv. But I believe that tribalism has begun to divide us as a people - this is my own opinion, but I think we have begun to look at each other through an us/them binary filter
  - c. One of the things I think that has contributed to this (again personal observation...I could be off the mark) is the coarsening of the way that we talk to each other
    - i. I think this has been facilitated by the rise of social media, but this is not going to be a reactionary sermon against the supposed evils of modern technology
    - ii. Rather an observation that the way we treat one another on social media is one of the most obvious symptoms of the us/them society we now live in that was unimaginable 20 years ago
    - iii. If you watch the news or paid attention to the twitter wars of our political leaders over the past four years then you know what I'm talking about – the name calling, the ad hominem attacks, etc

- iv. And we know the fallout of that coarsening – many peoples’ lives and livelihoods have been destroyed for what they’ve said or even failed to say – we have seen that our words can bring pain and death.
2. Today we continue our survey of James. We remember that the emphasis of his letter is that our actions line up with our faith as he says in 1:22, **“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”** (Jas 1:22)
- a. This week he talks about a part of our lives that is so difficult for us to control but is an essential part of our walk – controlling our tongues, that is how we talk to one another.
    - i. So, in being a doer of the Word, does the way you speak to or about people give evidence of your faith?
    - ii. James writes, **“So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell...no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”** (Jas 3:5-8)
    - iii. I think many of us know that very well, whether you use foul language (another ever-increasing tendency in our culture) or not you can still wreak much havoc with the right words. **In short is your tongue an instrument of death or life?**
  - b. Here on Sunday, we all sound wonderful: confessing our sins, singing glory to God, etc...etc...
    - i. But step out of church and let someone cut you off going home or get in your way and it’s amazing the things we’ll say (think)
    - ii. And it’s not just the tongue, just because you didn’t say something evil or hurtful doesn’t mean you didn’t think it
    - iii. Our Lord tells us in the Sermon on the Mount, **“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder...But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...”**
    - iv. God’s Law cuts to the intent of the heart not just mere word and act
  - c. But the destructive force of our words extends beyond just yelling and cursing
    - i. Some of the most damaging attacks don’t need volume or four letters
    - ii. **“You’re so stupid...you ALWAYS or you NEVER...I wish I never married you...I wish you’d never been born...”**
    - iii. There are times when we choose our words for maximum effect, a covert attack that you know will (in James’ words) set the forest ablaze
3. Contrast that with our OT lesson and we have a tale of two tongues – ours which brings death and destruction and the Lord’s that gives life and salvation

- a. These verses are the beginning of the third of Isaiah's Servant Songs attributed to the Messiah, **"The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary."** (Is 50:4)
  - i. What did our Lord say during His ministry, **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."** (Mat 11:28-30)
  - ii. And in the Gospel of John, **"The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."** (Jn 6:63)
  - iii. God's Word brings life; only the One Who was able to bring light out of darkness with nothing but His Word can create that change in us.
- b. Words can bring death and words can bring life
  - i. And only our Lord, through His life-giving Word, can transform our tongues from instruments of death to instruments of life
  - ii. Listen again to the Isaiah, **"Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward."** (Isa 50:4-5)
  - iii. As we continue to seek the Lord and His will through His Word our hearts, our minds, and our mouths are transformed.
- c. In the book of Ezekiel God shows Ezekiel a vision of a valley filled with dry bones (many of you might have heard of this vision)
  - i. The bones represented the nation of Israel, spiritually dead to point of being dry bones.
  - ii. And the Lord said to Ezekiel, **"Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD."** (Eze 37:3-4)
  - iii. And when Ezekiel preached the Word the dry bones came together and grew flesh and came to life – the Word of the Lord brought life out of death, transformation to dry bones.
- d. My brothers and sisters in Christ that is God's promise to each of us when we fill our lives with His Word, He will transform us as He promises in Ezekiel, **"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."** (Eze 36:26)
  - i. That is a heart of faith that responds to His Word and promise, that receive Christ as Savior and Lord.
  - ii. Then as our Lord tells us in Luke 6, **"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil**

**treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luk 6:45)**

- iii. Through that new heart of faith our Lord then transforms our tongues from instruments of death to instruments of life that speak His light into this present darkness.