

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC  
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### **Tongues of Fire**

**Text:** James 3:1-12

Few commencement speeches are memorable, much less any good. Speakers are usually well advised to hold their sage advice to another time, and to get through the exercise quickly and with a lot of humor. Ironically, on a day when people are receiving academic degrees, they are rarely willing to tolerate profundity. Few speakers fully take this to heart, though, and head for the middle ground of popular wisdom. Unfortunately, this compromise means that they end up dishing out a string of platitudes, or, if one is a politician, a version of one's stump speech. As a result the commencement address is rarely the highlight of a graduation.

I do recall, however, one exception to a long, dreary and sometimes appalling line of commencement addresses that I have heard in my life – and I have heard a lot of them. It was very nearly the first one that I heard. It was delivered by Eugene McCarthy in 1973, when his surprising dash for the Democratic presidential nomination had been over for more than a year. He was, in fact, at that point no longer even a senator. But at least he wasn't running for anything and that paid off in a memorable address. What was striking and memorable about the speech was its depth and content; it was *not* short or platitudinous. The speech was about the integrity of language. McCarthy stressed how important it is to maintain the integrity of language, warning about what happens when it isn't maintained. He cited as an example the German language which, after the Nazis got finished lying in it after World War II, was hardly fit for civilized use. Everything in it had become a reminder of violence or incitement to hatred. Its very face was false. McCarthy's advice to the graduating class was to make sure that they kept and guarded the

integrity of language; it was a way of saving their own lives as well as their communities.

The point was striking, but it was not novel. Such advice has been given for thousands of years. It is even biblical. *Proverbs* says, for example, that “the words of the wicked are a deadly ambush, but the speech of the righteous delivers them.” *Proverbs* also advises us that “rash words are like sword thrusts, the tongue of the wise brings healing.” The way that we use words is also the point of the wise and practical advice that James delivers in this morning’s epistle lesson, when he observes that the tongue is a fire, a fire that can set ablaze a great forest.

James is, of course, right. That little member lying tucked away in the middle of our faces when unchecked causes a world of trouble. More than anything else it causes the downfall of the mighty. Boasting, it overplays one’s hand, or gives out knowledge that is better kept secret, or expresses opinions that are far better kept to oneself. Such words spoken by it generate hatred and enmity, but also often reduce the tongue’s owner to disgrace. We can all easily point to examples in national, communal and personal life of those who have wreaked havoc on their own lives and the lives of others by a few foolishly spoken words. Van Jones’ dismissal this week from the administration for nasty anatomical slurs about Republicans and for earlier signing a petition suggesting that George Bush had advance knowledge of the September 11 attacks is only the most recent case. (Well, it was on Wednesday morning when I wrote that sentence. By Thursday morning, Washington had yet another star entrant in the “shoot off your mouth and shoot yourself in the foot” sweepstakes.)

A lot of havoc comes from boasting, from being arrogant enough to think you can say anything, but it also comes from other loose, unguarded uses of language. It comes from lying, when we betray the trust of others in words by using words in false ways. It comes in the exaggeration of proud words, when we want to make ourselves greater and our enemies smaller.

It comes in slander and in gossip where we are little concerned for the truth of what we say, but are terrifically concerned to make sure that we are thought by others to be important people because of what we know. It comes in what is called “colonization,” when one makes sure he is the first to tell the story about a situation. In doing so, he plants his flag and claims the territory. After that everybody else has to argue against that story, no matter how false or outlandish. The colonizer’s story sets the boundaries of discussion and imagination.

So, indeed, James is right when he says that though “the tongue is a small member, it boasts of great exploits.” And boasting, it does set whole worlds on fire. It brings down individuals, ruining their reputations and threatening their lives. It, small thing though it is, brings on wars and truly massive destruction. Although there are wars that really are defensive, they are rare and few and far between, since often the only thing actually being defended and fought against in most wars are bombastic words – bombastic words that started them and bombastic words that continue to fuel them. In a play written during World War II, the French author Jean Giraudaux wrote a play about the Trojan War that was based on the premise that Helen of Troy never existed, and that the Greeks and Trojans fought for nine long years over a phantom. But, it also suggested, that didn’t really matter once the first war-like words were spoken. One wonders if something like that doesn’t happen time and time again. It was Giraudaux’s point that it has.

Now, one lesson to be taken away from all these gross misuses of words and of language, from all these examples of unbridled tongues, is that words do count. They are not “just words;” they are, in fact, often far more dangerous than sticks and stones. What we say has real effects, and those effects come about precisely because of the words that have been spoken. We therefore always need to be careful of the words we use, for we don’t get them back.

But there is also another deeper lesson to be drawn out here. It is not just that the misuse of words has bad effects, it is that words in themselves are important, for they name things and, within sentences, they put things together. Words are meant to communicate and to bring minds and hearts together; to misuse them therefore not only brings destruction such as wars, it also brings about the destruction of the words themselves. When words no longer have meaning, then there is the destruction of the very possibility of human communication and community.

This has been the most distressing aspect of the so-called debate surrounding health care in the last month. How the issue gets resolved is important, and one ought to have an informed opinion about it. But when the debate involves one liners such as likening President Obama to Hitler or to Chairman Mao, thus ridiculously suggesting that he is attempting death panels, or to indoctrinate school children into socialism the very possibility of being informed on anything slips out of our grasp. Similarly when gross factual errors are made by senators that are soon enough authoritatively corrected, but remain unacknowledged and repeated anyhow, then, there, too, the very possibility of building a community seems to have slipped out of our grasp. We can't have a community without words, and when these are the ways we use words, we may fear losing hope of finding a genuine common good.

In the book of *Genesis*, soon after creating Adam and Eve, God paraded every animal of the field and every bird of the air before our first father and mother, and they proceeded to name each creature. *Genesis* says that “whatever they called every living creature that was its name.” According to an ancient tradition, when Adam and Eve were later cast out of the garden those original names of things were lost. Within certain later mystical traditions it became a task to set oneself to discover that first, original name. Why would anyone seek for a lost word? Because, they believed, what had been lost was not just a name, but the knowledge of what the thing really

was, a knowledge that Adam and Eve had in the beginning when they were still just, and not sinners. The attempt to gain the original name was therefore actually an attempt to see each thing as it really is; to see it justly and righteously, and not with eyes clouded by self-interest and self-justification. To call each thing by its name was to be just and kind to it, and respect it; it was to establish community with what was named. It was also to see it in relation to the Word of God itself, the light and life of all people that unites all people to God and to each other.

Now, there are two conclusions to be drawn from this story and mystical tradition. The first is the negative one. To misuse words is not an arbitrary and indifferent matter; it is a big deal. Misusing words is not caring about what things are and how we are related to them, just as calling Mary by the name of Susan indicates that we couldn't care less about who Mary really is. It is a lack of respect. So to misuse words is not only to set things aflame, it is a deep injustice on the part of the speaker. It indicates that we do not care what things are; it indicates that we have no respect for the heavenly Word that stands behind every word and that "gives to the stars their names" as the psalmist says.

The other conclusion is a very positive one. If the misuse of language is an injustice, the right use of it is an important part of a righteous and holy life. Again to quote James: "We all make many mistakes. But anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle." Or to use another of the apostle's analogies, the tongue is like the rudder of a great ship. It may be small, but used rightly it keeps the great ship on course. To use language correctly, to call things by their right names, is to live a righteous life, and to steer one's course rightly. It is also to be just to others, and to build up the community.

How does one build up the community by speaking well? There are two ways. One is by not misusing language, the other is using language and words as they were meant to be used.

One needs to avoid misusing language. This, of course, means one should not use words to lie, to slander, to brag, to put down, to misrepresent. Sometimes it means, too, having the wisdom to know well enough when to say nothing. Often the temptation to slander and to brag is simply the inability to resist the temptation to draw attention to one's self and one's own cleverness. One needs to resist that. But sometimes it is also important to say little or nothing because there are times when wise words will not be heard and will be mocked. The seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal once noted that the difference in talking to a lame man and to a fool is that when you are talking to the lame man there is no question as to who is lame and who is not. With respect to the fool, however, the one thing that will never be clear in the conversation is who can reason and who can't. The fool *always* thinks it is he. Therefore one ought never to argue with fools because you will never convince them. Their inability to be convinced by reason and their privileging their own position is what makes them fools. Moreover, arguing with them only encourages them in their foolishness. As one rather wise rabbi put it, one ought never to argue with fools, because in doing so, it may not be apparent to those listening as to who is who. But there is also another reason why it is sometimes best to keep silence. For there are times that it is important just to look and listen to others. Sometimes to use words rightly, one needs to take the time to understand what is being talked about, and that rarely comes from doing all the talking. The book of *Ecclesiastes* says, "fools talk on and on."

But silence is only half of verbal virtue. I have a Dutch Calvinist friend who once told me about an uncle of hers who refused to say anything, figuring that when he came to judgment that there wouldn't be anything that could be used against him. Perhaps; but then there is nothing that could be said for him, either. Somebody has to break the silence somewhere along the way. And we do need to speak. While wisdom surely knows when not to speak, it also knows what to say

and when to say it. And that only comes by speaking.

Certainly, as St. James observes, we all make mistakes. But mistakes are not injustices to God and creatures if we keep our minds firmly fixed on using language in the way it was meant to be used. How is that? How is it to be used? Above all it is to be used to speak of things as they really are, and not as we would like them to be. It is even to be used to describe our enemies fairly, and not in such a way that we compare our best features with their worst ones. Language is to be used to comfort and to offer compassion. It is to be used chiefly as a means of bringing one mind into another. It is also to be used to teach, for good language reveals and shows things for what they are; it shows us and others new and important things about the world and ourselves. It also condemns injustice and corrects bad language; it is often prophetic. It is to be used for prayer; and, as Peter uses it in this morning's Gospel lesson, it is to be used to confess our faith.

There is a prayer by Thomas Aquinas that includes these words: "Thou hast made eloquent the tongues of children, therefore touch my lips with graciousness. Make me keen to learn and able to remember. Make me delicate to interpret and ready to speak." Those are good things to speak in prayer, for they are a prayer for the right use of words.

Let us then use language well – to reveal, to comfort, to learn, to pray, to confess. Let it also be our prayer that in doing so we will learn and remember, that we will be able to keep silence, that we will speak when needed, and that we might be generous in interpretation. For it is by using words well that God's own Word comes close to use and becomes a gift for us, and for all the world to whom we speak.