

The Lord cleanses our tongue - James 3:1-12.

This morning our text for meditate is from the Epistle of James which was read before. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together". Amen

A Greek philosopher asked his servant to provide the best dish possible. The servant prepared a dish of tongue, saying: "It is the best of all dishes, because with it we may bless and communicate happiness, dispel sorrow, remove despair, cheer the fainthearted, inspire the discouraged, and say a hundred other things to uplift mankind."

Later the philosopher asked his servant to provide the worst dish of which he could think. A dish of tongue appeared on the table. The servant said, "It is the worst, because with it we may curse and break human hearts; destroy reputations; promote discord and strife; set families, communities, and nations at war with each other."

King Solomon said, "Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles" (Proverbs 21:23).

Friends our tongue is a great thing! Our mouth is one of the most spectacular wonders of God's whole creation! How amazing is it, that God enables us to communicate – to know each other – to learn – by the breath that passes over your vocal chords! Think about that!

James draws a beautiful picture for us this morning of the power of the tongue: ***If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, 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 things.*** Just as a few inches of metal rod can change the direction of a whole horse, and just as a three foot rudder in the water can be used to turn a whole boat around – so likewise our TONGUE has the ability to change the direction of our whole day, our whole body, our whole life!

Tongues can boast of great things, wonderful things. For example you can say to someone "You are a gift to everyone you meet." Friends, these words could change the whole day of that person; and that might work out rather well for you too. The tongue is not big, but it can turn the world around for someone. Your tongue can defend someone, explaining everything in the kindest way, so that those around you, family, neighbor, friend, so that their

honour is protected and maintained, maybe even her job is protected. And, how would that make everything different, for the better?

Your mouth – just your little mouth – can be used by God to speak the right word of encouragement to your sister or brother in Christ even here this day. It could be just that word that makes her or him so glad that they came to God's house, to gather with God's people, and to see you too. And, amazingly, your mouth, your tongue, can here sing praise to the Almighty God.

Think about that. God loves to hear His name come out of your mouth. God has given you a tongue that you may confess with your lips: *I believe in God the Father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord... I believe in the Holy Spirit.*

With those words you kick the devil back to hell and cause all of heaven's angels to rejoice. Your tongue sure can boast of great things!

Ah, but that tongue; great power, but not always used for good. It also causes the worst of harm. It has power to cause misery too. James is honest about this. He has some of the harshest words ever to describe the wicked trouble that comes through the sinful human tongue: ***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.***

Yes, with words we make lives miserable. We learn a little gossip about someone and share it around. Bad news travels fast that way, or as Luther put it: *'it is a common vice of human nature that everyone would rather hear evil than good about his neighbor.'* We would rather speak evil too.

We slander – yes, slander – a good name, when we say words we should not speak. And once we do, it is like a fire that cannot be stopped. Once the words of gossip are out of our mouths, there's no putting them back in. Sometimes what comes from our tongues are just plain hurting words. We say them to cause pain. We say them to take out our anger. We say them to make ourselves feel better by making someone else feel worse.

Worst of all, the tongue can speak *false*ly of God and His Christ. That's why the worst words that can come out of our mouth are those that tell lies about God. When we deny the true faith, our tongue is twisted by the fires of hell.

You might think that James – and the Holy Spirit through James – is being pessimistic about our tongue's condition. But he speaks the reality. And we know it. We experience

it. We lament the damage that our tongues have done. And it is not just a matter of trying harder to fix it – though you, as people who speak in Christ, should try harder. So should I. We have a real hard time controlling our mouths, tying up our tongues when they need to be tied.

We cannot clean up and fix our tongue by washing our mouth out with soap. In fact, I do not think the tongue can really be stopped even if we cut it right out. We would still have fingers, and a keyboard, or cellphone, and we could blog all our nasty thoughts about people on the internet.

And putting little smiley faces ☺ after we have just laid a slicing word into someone's character in an email does not make it 'just a joke'. Words do not joke. They are restless, full of poison. And Christians have this problem – you and I have it too. That's why James writes this letter to the '**brothers**', to the '*teachers*' of the brothers, to the church.

In fact, we who teach the world the knowledge of Christ by our words, by our confession, are the ones who ***will be judged with greater strictness***. Perhaps our tongues are the worst offenders.

As we heard from St. James last week, the concern is that our faith in Jesus Christ be living, not dead. Living faith, faith in the living Christ, will shape our lives, our actions. It will also shape our words. It will mold our tongue in a new way.

The only way for that to happen is for Jesus to step in. And He has stepped in. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary so that He could have a tongue like ours. And His tongue probably started working right away. Jesus cried the birthing cry, the announcement that God had taken on flesh to save the world.

And unlike EVERY other human tongue, Jesus used His mouth only for the saving of all people. He spoke parables that revealed the Kingdom of God. When people listened to Him in His hometown synagogue, they were amazed at the words that fell from His lips.

Jesus said miraculous words, speaking... lepers clean, blind... to see, lame... to walk, even the dead to rise. Jesus preached forgiveness to ears that would never have expected it. Even when Jesus spoke 'woes' to the scribes and Pharisees, He did so in pure love. He used His mouth to call them to repentance, that they might have mouths again to speak God's truth.

But the most astonishing and salutary use of Jesus' mouth happened when He did not open it at all. When He was accused of crimes of treason and blasphemy, Jesus did not answer back, did not defend Himself, did not argue, did not fight back with words, but ***like a sheep before its shearer is silent, so He did not open His mouth.*** Is. 53:7

Jesus allowed every false accusation to be spoken against Him. He absorbed the words that have wounded you, and the words that you have used to wound others. Jesus let the sins of your mouth be His sins, held to His account.

And for those words He was nailed to the cross, hanged to die before the world. Only from the cross He spoke ***"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do....Also "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." And "Into Your hands I commit My spirit." And "It is finished."***

Jesus' holy mouth was not silenced by death, or by the tomb. His tongue is ever-living. And when He appears to His fearful disciples behind locked doors, He put His forgiveness into words for them: ***Peace be with you.***

Jesus is still announcing that peace. Jesus is still interceding, using His tongue on YOUR behalf as He speaks to God His Father. He is your Advocate. He is the One Who speaks in your defense, sitting at the Father's right hand. Jesus uses His tongue to cleanse your tongue.

We confess here our sins of thought – and WORD – and deed. Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness, through a human tongue, covers them all.

When you were baptized, your mouth was included under water and word. You have a baptized tongue. Remember that. Let that baptismal grace shape your words now. Here at this altar the living Lord Christ comes and places His own perfect sacrificed but living body in your mouth. He gives His blood poured out for the forgiveness of the many to be poured over your tongue, past your vocal chords, and down your throat.

Friends, Jesus is re-forming your tongue each day to be used to bless God, and to bless people made in God's image. The new and right breath to pass over your vocal chords is the Holy Spirit – the breath of God. Thanks be to His holy name. Amen

In the name of the Father, and the + Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen