

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE
Part 2: The Holiness of a Spirit-Tamed Tongue
Scripture: James 3:1-12

Preached on the weekend of September 16 and 17, 2006

In my sermon last week, I suggested that the most urgent and substantive challenge before us as people of faith is the challenge of remembering who we are and why we are. In this world where there is someONE at every turn who is eager to claim us and someTHING at every turn that is eager to define us, the most urgent challenge before us as followers of Jesus Christ is the challenge of remembering who we are and why we are.

For the next several weeks, we are spending some time during worship centering ourselves in a very particular question, a question that I think will help us to remember who and why we are. The question to which I am making reference is this: What is a disciple? It is an important and appropriate question, I think, especially given that our church's mission statement, printed on the front of your bulletin, makes clear that we exist as a church to make disciples of Jesus Christ through the ministry of worship, outreach, relationship, and discipline. The act of making disciples, then, is inseparably linked to our identity and our purpose. That is why this question is so critically important for us in the act of remembering who we are and why we are: What is a disciple?

Last week, Scripture provided one important response to that question. Scripture told us last week that a disciple is a person of faith, but not just any faith. More specifically, disciples are people whose faith is not simply a set of beliefs, but a growing relationship with Jesus Christ—a relationship that has changed and reoriented their heart to such an extent that it has become their greatest joy in life to bless others with good works of mercy and ministry. Faith without works, proclaimed last week's scripture, is dead. But, on the other hand, works without faith are random and unsubstantiated. Therefore, a disciple is a person who grows both in their faith relationship with Jesus Christ and in the good works that that relationship should inspire.

This week, Scripture offers a second response to the question at hand. What is a disciple? Well, tonight's scripture maintains that disciples are people who love Jesus enough to subordinate to him the most powerful organ in their bodies: the tongue. Which is to say, disciples are people with a tongue that is so thoroughly tamed and governed by the Holy Spirit of God, that their speech, vocabulary, and language illuminate the kingdom of God instead of besmirching it.

Tonight's scripture from the New Testament book of James begins with the rather strange proclamation that not many of us should become teachers in the faith. The biblical author offers that proclamation, not for the purpose of being unkind or insulting, but for the purpose of highlighting the point that teachers have to be people who are careful with the words that they speak. Let's be honest, that requirement automatically excludes most of us. Most of us are not careful with the words that we speak. Therefore, says tonight's scripture, not many of us should become teachers in the faith, because teachers will be

judged in the public eye far more strictly than anyone else. Their words will be listened to far more closely.

In order to further emphasize the urgency of the way in which we use our words, the biblical author makes his way through a variety of colorful metaphors, all of which illustrate the power of the human tongue. “The tongue is like a rudder on a big ship,” What does a rudder do? It determines the direction of the ship. In much the same way, the tongue determines the direction of our life and has the capacity to altar our course in good ways and bad.

If that biblical metaphor is lost on you, then try these on for size. “The tongue is a fire, setting an entire forest ablaze...The tongue is a stain on the entire body...The tongue is a manifestation of hellfire...The tongue is a wild animal that no one can seem to tame...The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Such is the evocative and metaphorical language about the human tongue that we find tonight in the pages of Scripture.

I probably don't have to do very much to convince you of the validity of what scripture teaches about the power of the human tongue. In fact, I would imagine that every single one of us is here tonight carrying with us vivid memories concerning the ways in which we have been both utterly blessed and utterly crushed by other peoples' words. Perhaps we also carry with us some vivid memories concerning the ways in which we have blessed and crushed others with the words that we have chosen to speak.

Do you remember a specific time in which you heard those three life-altering words, “I love you,” from someone who meant the world to you? Or have you ever had to deal with the pain of hearing the words, “I don't love you anymore,” or even worse, “I hate you”? When was the last time that you were blessed by a heartfelt compliment or affirmation? When was the last time that your spirit was deflated by an unexpected insult, or by a criticism that was more mean-spirited than it was constructive?

Words are so powerful that it doesn't take many of them to impact a soul, or at least to alter a mood or the direction of one's day.

In the bleak totalitarian environment of George Orwell's classic novel, 1984, when the State wanted to gain control of the people, one of the first things that it did was to create a new language called “newspeak.” The purpose of newspeak was to dictate the kind of conversation that the public was having, thereby creating a controlled environment in which people's words, and therefore people's ideas, could be monitored and even governed by the State. In that novel, the State understood very clearly the power of words. What's more, the State understood that, if it were to control the people, it must first control the people's most potent resource: language.

Think about how our language is tampered with and modified in our current cultural environment. What is the difference, for example, between a “fetus” and an “unborn child?” (It has been suggested that we call it an “unborn child” when we intend to keep it

and we call it a “fetus” when we don’t.) Or what about our nomenclature for death? We don’t tend to say that a loved one died. That’s far too clinical. We poeticize it. “He passed away.”

Individually and as a culture, we are tampering with words all the time, because, consciously or unconsciously, we are aware of the power that our words contain.

I suppose that the power of our words should come as no surprise to us. It is true, after all, that the entire narrative of Scripture bears witness to the power of language. How was it that God created in the Genesis account, for example? Not simply by waving a hand, but by speaking: “Let there be light!” How was it that God communicated with the people of Israel? By speaking through the prophets. In the fullness of time, how was it that God became incarnate? Scripture tells us that he became incarnate in and through Jesus Christ, whom the prologue to John’s gospel describes as “the Word made flesh.” Not simply “God made flesh,” mind you, but the word of God made flesh. And two thousand years after that incarnational moment, we are quick to describe Scripture as what? The Word of God for the people of God.

In tonight’s scripture, then, the author’s emphasis on the power of the tongue is merely encapsulating what all of Scripture and what all of life confirm, and that is this: Our words are not merely communicational sounds and utterances. Rather, our words are powerful vessels of expression that have the capacity to build and to break, to bless and to curse, to create and to destroy, depending upon their content.

“From the same mouth,” says tonight’s scripture, “from the same mouth come both words that bless God and words that curse other people who have been created in the image of God. Brothers and sisters,” the scripture concludes, “this ought not to be so.” Which is to say, let there be a consistency and a purity to all of your speech. If you are someone who is interested in blessing God with your lips, then let all of your speech be an expression of your love for God. Let all of your speech be consistent with your devotion to God’s kingdom, so that your speech will consistently bring forth the fresh water of blessing and not the brackish water of bitter cursing.

Back to our foundational question: What is a disciple? Tonight’s scripture provides another important response to that question. Disciples are people who love Jesus enough to subordinate to him the most powerful organ in their bodies: the tongue. Disciples, in other words, are people determined to allow their tongue to be so thoroughly tamed and governed by the Holy Spirit of God, that their speech, vocabulary, and language are more likely to illuminate the kingdom of God than to besmirch it.

As someone who often speaks very quickly and sometimes very competitively, I find myself wondering if the discipline of allowing the Holy Spirit to tame our tongue demands of us that we speak more patiently than we would normally be inclined to speak. Think about that for a moment. Think about what it might mean to speak patiently.

So much of contemporary communication, it seems to me, is far more focused on the rapid and relentless expression of one's own thoughts and ideas than it is on a heartfelt and patient listening to the thoughts and ideas of other people. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone that you sensed wasn't really listening to you? You sensed that when they weren't speaking, they weren't really listening to you, they were merely reloading for what they wanted to say next. It's exhausting, isn't it?

I hear people all the time congratulate themselves with this kind of proclamation: "I always speak my mind." Who in the world wants to be around someone who speaks their mind all the time—especially if it's not always a good mind?! Especially if it's not always a mind that produces ideas that are well-constructed?!

I had a football coach who used to say that one of the most dangerous combinations in life is constipation of the brain and diarrhea of the mouth! That, I suppose, is a rather poetic expression of the urgency of speaking patiently; not always speaking our mind (if our mind is not in a good condition); not always saying everything we really want to.

Years ago, I received an e-mail from a disgruntled church member. In the e-mail, he criticized my ministry, he insulted the leadership of the church, he made accusations that were unfounded, and he outlined all of the things that were wrong with the church's ministry. My first reaction was to e-mail a quick response. I sat down at the computer and created a pointed, detailed, exhaustive response to his e-mail, addressing all of his points, articulating all of my counterpoints, thereby successfully defending the church and its ministry. "I'll show him."

But before I sent the e-mail, something inside of me (let's give the Holy Spirit credit) told me that it would be a good idea for me to seek out the counsel of another believer whose wisdom I trusted. When he read my response to the e-mail, which I had not yet sent, he said to me, "Eric, I'm not sure that it would be a good thing to send this." "What? Are you insane?! Re-read it. Pay attention to how good and clearly-worded my arguments are!" "It has nothing to do with that," he said. "It has to do with your motive." "What do you mean by that?" "Well," he said, "this e-mail sounds like it was written by somebody who is more interested in winning an argument than witnessing for Christ."

I didn't send the e-mail. I didn't send it because a wise Christ-follower helped me to understand that my words in the e-mail were not helpful words. Rather, they were words designed to bury and opponent in what had become a meaningless and hurtful debate. That wise Christ-follower alerted me to the urgency of speaking patiently; not always speaking our mind (if our mind is not in a good condition); not always saying everything we really want to.

How many of our relational conflicts would be different if we allowed the Holy Spirit to cultivate within us the capacity to speak patiently. Allow me to make it even more personal. Are you patient in your speech? At work? At home? At church? Do the rhythms of your speech bear witness to the patience of God? Or are you merely interested in speaking your own mind as quickly as you possibly can?

In light of Scripture, I also find myself wondering if the discipline of allowing the Holy Spirit to tame our tongue demands of us that we speak more prayerfully than we would normally be inclined to speak. Think about that for a moment. Think about what it might mean for you to allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate within you a prayerful speech.

Dr. John Westerhoff, who was my professor of spiritual formation during my seminary years, once shared with the class that he is always very intentional about speaking slowly when he communicates with people who are difficult for him to like. Someone asked him why. “Two reasons,” was his response. “First, slower speech enables helps me to make sure that my words don’t get ahead of my thoughts. And second, slower speech enables me to fill the pauses between my sentences with split-second prayers.” “Prayers? You mean you pray during conversations?” “Are you kidding,” Dr. Westerhoff said. “If I weren’t offering those split-second prayers during some of my conversations, asking God to bless my words, who knows what nasty things I would say? Because those prayers are normally what remind me that God values the person to whom I am speaking differently than I do.”

How many of our relational conflicts would be different if we allowed the Holy Spirit to cultivate within us the capacity to speak prayerfully, the capacity to saturate our daily conversations with a spirit of prayer, thereby reminding ourselves that God values the people to whom we are speaking differently than we do?

I have mentioned to you before that one of my spiritual heroes is the late Corrie Ten Boom, an extraordinary Christ-follower who, along with her sister Betsy, was imprisoned by the Nazi’s during World War II for providing assistance to Jewish families. In the years after the war, Corrie was called upon frequently to speak to different churches, so that she might share with people the story of her faith and the story of how that faith survived and even flourished amidst her mistreatment in that Nazi concentration camp. One evening, as Corrie greeted people in the back of a sanctuary, she found herself face to face with a man who had been one of her most violent and brutal tormentors in the concentration camp. He was no longer wearing his military uniform, but she would never forget his face. Corrie said that, as soon as she recognized him, she lost her breath, began to perspire with a cold sweat, and, in her mind, was instantaneously transported to that concentration camp, where this man had mistreated Corrie and her sister so regularly.

“I had hated him for so long,” Corrie said in her description of that event, “that I had grown comfortable with my hatred, so much so that hatred was the only emotion that I could generate when I saw this man years after the war had ended.”

“But hatred and the Holy Spirit cannot coexist in the same heart,” she continued. “And so I stepped back from this man, closed my eyes, and prayed a 15-second prayer that went something like this: ‘Lord Jesus, I do not have the wherewithal to forgive this man on my own, and so I am asking you to forgive him through me, that I might begin to see him with new eyes.’”

“That simple prayer became the conduit through which the Holy Spirit made his way into my hateful heart and empowered me, not only to shake this man’s hand, but to embrace him; empowered me to speak to him, not only words of politeness, but words of forgiveness.”

How many of our relational conflicts would be different if we allowed the Holy Spirit to cultivate within us the capacity to speak not only patiently but also prayerfully? How might our conversations be different if we were allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate within us the capacity to saturate our daily conversations with a spirit of prayer, thereby reminding ourselves that God values the people to whom we are speaking differently than we do? How might we be surprised at the grace and the mercy that God offers to others through our words?

Scripture is clear. The tongue is like both a fire and an untamed animal. It is also like a well that produces both the fresh water of blessing and the brackish water of cursing. Disciples of Jesus Christ are people determined to allow their tongue to be so thoroughly tamed and governed by the Holy Spirit of God, that their speech, vocabulary, and language are more likely to illuminate the kingdom of God than to besmirch it.

Are you willing to live out that kind of radical discipleship to Jesus Christ? Are you willing to put even your speech at the foot of the cross, saying, “Lord Jesus, I want my words to be your words. I want my language to be your language.” After all, the tongue is a fire. The question is, what kind of fire will our tongue be? Will it be the cleansing and refining fire of the Holy Spirit? Or will it be a destroying fire that burns things down? I encourage you to choose wisely.

