

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for September 13, 2009
Proper 19B ~ Psalm 19, James 3:1-12
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

On this day one year ago I was sitting in front of a television set in Austin, Texas looking at the damage done during the night to my island home. Eight years ago, I was still in shock over the outrageous act of hatred and violence that has in some ways defined every anxious moment in our national life ever since. This week, remembering these catastrophic events, I am conscious of something else that has reached a critical point – a catastrophic failure of civility. I have found myself struggling to manage my own behavior and bridle my own tongue as I've listened to heated exchanges between people who are supposed to be friends and colleagues.

If the tone of conversations about political issues in recent weeks is any indicator, civility in American life has reached an all-time low. Let's hope the outburst by the Congressman from South Carolina during the President's address to Congress on healthcare reform last week represents rock bottom and things will begin to improve.

Christians play a vital role in the political process in this country. They always have. However, it is a sad thing when that voice becomes one with the shrill, strident, rude voices that make groundless accusations, promote falsehood, and encourage hatred and bigotry.

Today's reading from the Letter of James offers the followers of Jesus an admonition regarding the use of our tongues. The wisdom of James' admonition suggests that there is an option for Christians that goes beyond civility.

“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.”

– James 3:6-12

The message of James, coupled with the words of the Psalmist, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer,” (Psalm 19) which we read today, suggest a way for Christians of all political viewpoints to make a constructive contribution to conversations regarding controversial issues at home and abroad. With our tongues, we have the potential to bless or to curse. God has called and entrusted to us a message of peace and reconciliation. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. My argument for or against any issue may not be the one that changes the mind of my opponent. But my words have the power to change lives and to bless. So, I need to be careful what I say and how I say it!

The "spring which gives water" and the "tree which yields fruit," are lessons for the tongue. The spring and the tree are either healthy or unhealthy. A good spring gives good water and a good tree gives good fruit. So also the tongue is an indicator of the heart that lies within. The tongue is a "revealer" of the heart of the one who speaks.

The story is told of a man who lived in a highland village in Scotland. He passed along a rumor about another man for whom he did not care. The story, he thought to be true. When the story got around the village, it utterly destroyed the man. His family, his job and his integrity were all devastated by the rumor mill. He finally had to leave town -- a ruined and defeated man.

As you might have guessed, the fellow who passed the story along discovered that the rumor was false. He had helped to destroy an innocent man with his tongue. He went to his pastor (whom they called "Dominie") and said, "Dominie, I have destroyed a man with my words" and he told his pastor the whole story. "Please Dominie," he said, "I am sorry -- can I be forgiven this sin?"

The pastor told the man that this was not so simple and told him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the fellow thought this to be a strange request for a pastor to make, he really wanted forgiveness, so he followed the instructions to the letter. At last he came back to the pastor and said, "Dominie, I have done all that you asked, may I now be forgiven?"

"Not yet, my son," the pastor replied, "You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village!"

"But, Dominie -- I could never do that, the wind has carried the feathers away!"

"Yes," the pastor said, "And in like manner have your careless words destroyed an innocent man!"

Humans have been given a special place and purpose in the divine scheme of things. My friend and colleague, The Rev. Mifflin Dove wrote this beautiful message after being inspired by some photographs from the Hubble Telescope: "The word "uni-verse" comes from the Latin phrase "unus versus," which can be translated as 'one verse.' A verse is a line of poetry. When God spoke the universe into being, it can be said that God poetically crafted Creation through his word. We truly are God's artwork..."

I believe that is so. We *are* God's artwork. And, not only that, we are God's artists, who are privileged, in ways no other creature knows, to participate with God in the ongoing process of creation and redemption. That privilege places a special burden on our shoulders. Perhaps, it is our cross to bear. But let us bear it with courage and hope, believing that the way we use the gift of language can bless the lives of those all around us just as surely as that gift can be used to bless God. For, how can we say we love God, whom we cannot see, when our words are hateful toward our neighbors, created in the likeness of God, whom we can see?

By all means, express your views. Speak your mind. But, by God's grace, when you do, try to let the words you speak reflect the influence of the mind of Christ!

And, so, we pray: "Grant, O Lord, we pray, that the words we have said and sung this day may find favor in your sight, and that your truth may be grafted in our hearts, that our lives may show forth its fruit, to your honor and glory, for ever and ever. Amen."