

**Sermon for October 18, 2015 (Proper 24 amended, Year B)  
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 3:1-12; Psalm 104:1-9,25,37b; Mark 10:35-45

Title: The Tongue is a Fire!

“With [the same, single tongue] 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” (James 3:9-10).

Do any of you ever feel convicted, as if a text in the Bible was written specifically for you? Well, that’s me when I read this text.

You see, on a typical Autumn Sunday, I am here at Saint Mary’s in the morning with all of you blessing our Lord and heavenly Father.

Singing praises to God. And it feels so good, so uplifting, so encouraging.

But then Sunday afternoon comes around, and I watch football.

And more often than not, there is some cursing which rolls off of my tongue.

And it doesn’t always feel so good or encouraging – at least not with my team!

OK, so this is a little bit of public confession.

Erin has often suggested that we host a SuperBowl party at the rectory.

However, I am always quick to cut down that idea, because I don’t think that my behavior when watching football would be helpful or edifying for anyone to watch!

I guess I like to imagine that sports constitutes some kind of alternative universe, where the commandments of God don’t really apply.

What do you think? Do I have a leg to stand on here? I doubt it.

Remember that James has consistently criticized the double-mindedness of human beings. God is one, *haplōs* in the Greek. Singular, consistent, unchanging.

God is incredibly generous in responding to all people in the same, compassionate, merciful way.

This is the firm foundation underlying all of this letter of James.



Or the favorite among pre-teen girls: “I hate you.”

We probably all grew up with the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

Well, bones can heal in a reasonable amount of time. But when you are wounded by words like these, the healing process can take far longer.

“The tongue is a fire” (James 3:6) and it can burn.

But, like the horse, like the sea winds, and like fire itself, it can also be harnessed and used for tremendous good.

I recently heard the story of a high school principal in one of the depressed and troubled parts of North Philadelphia. Linda Cliatt-Wayman is her name.

(Here is her inspiring TED talk:

[http://www.ted.com/talks/linda\\_cliatt\\_wayman\\_how\\_to\\_fix\\_a\\_broken\\_school\\_lead\\_fearlessly\\_love\\_hard](http://www.ted.com/talks/linda_cliatt_wayman_how_to_fix_a_broken_school_lead_fearlessly_love_hard) )

Her first day serving as principal, there was a big fight in the school. So right away, she called an all-school assembly in order to lay down the law, and also to introduce herself and talk about her goals for the school.

As she talked, one young woman in the back of the assembly stood up and said, “Miss, Miss: why do you keep calling this a school? This ain’t no school.”

In a way, the girl was right. The front doors were kept locked. The student lockers didn’t work. Most of the classroom equipment was old and didn’t function. Both the students and the teachers were afraid to show up, concerned about their safety. There was not much learning going on.

Praise God, this new principal turned things around. She put a number of best practices into place and took a number of steps to change the culture of the school.

But the thing which stood out to me most was this new principal’s commitment to tell each student that she loved them. Every morning at her high school, Miss Cliatt-Wayman gets on the PA system and reiterates the school’s non-negotiable, strict behavior expectations and then she concludes – every single morning – by saying, “If no one told you today that they love you, know that I do and I always will.”

Guess what? Her students love her back. And the culture is changing for the better in that school.

In the book of Proverbs, it is stated that “death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

Our words can give life and they can cause destruction.

We can not leave this pericope without talking about the issue of “cursing”. Let’s be clear: cursing means something different now than it did in the days when the New Testament was written.

Today, we think of certain 4-letter words which are taboo in polite company, and which are carefully blocked in our media by the Federal Communications Commission (the FCC).

This is NOT what James is referring to. As we have discussed, the tongue has enormous power to be life-giving and also to be death-dealing. Words are simply tools toward these ends, and this includes all of the so-called taboo curse words.

They are simply tools. And what matters with ANY tool is how you use it, what your intention is. If you use a hammer to nail together a wall, that’s a good thing. But if you use that same hammer to smash car windows, that’s a problem.

But the problem is not with the tool! It’s with your intention to do harm!

All words function in the same way. In fact, savvy people know how to painfully gut someone with words which sound quite ordinary in another context.

Sarcasm in delivery does far more damage than any so-called “curse word” ever could.

I wonder if the FCC could block out sarcasm from our TV shows?

My friends, what matters in all things is the intention of your heart. This is what the Lord Jesus teaches us. Remember in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “If you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council. And if you say, ‘You fool’, you will be liable to the Gehenna of fire” (Matthew 5:22).

What matters, what is subject to judgment, is if you intend for your words to bless the hearer or to curse, to harm, the hearer.

Once again, the challenge delivered by this letter of James is quite clear and simple. It is to speak in such a way that we never intend harm or evil to any other human being, and to use our words only to bless God and those around us.

The problem, as James aptly describes, is that “all of us make many mistakes” (James 3:2). And, NO, I do not have the strength within myself to cease from cursing the Dallas Cowboys. Only the grace of God can enable that depth of transformation!

Seriously, if you are anything like me and you are also acutely aware of how many mistakes you make with your words, then remember: this is not about guilt and trying to do better.

Yes, it is right to maintain high expectations – to aim for the highest standards of behavior. But the good news of the Gospel is that the Lord can and will change us from the inside out.

We cannot be free of mistakes in speaking without an infusion of the grace of God. Part of what it means to open our souls to the Lord Jesus is to allow him to take control of our tongues, to guide our speech so that it gives life and grace to all who hear.

Why not ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in speaking every time you enter into a challenging conversation? If you do that, and if you trust that the Spirit’s guidance will be there, you will not be disappointed. May it be so. Amen.