

“Speech!” – Stephanie Wing, 9.13.09

It is fitting that our reading this morning focuses on the importance of speech after last week. Early in the week we were inundated with talk about President Obama's address to students. There were the charges of indoctrination and brainwashing, cries that parents should decide what their children are exposed to, and on the other side, defense of the address and its message as well as calls to support the President and the need to show respect for the office. We had the speech itself, followed by the responses from citizens, students, and political pundits. Few speeches are so publicly scrutinized. The following evening the President spoke for nearly 45 minutes about his plan for health care reform. There were cheers, some jeers, and the now infamous outburst, "You lie!" from a Representative who has since apologized for letting his emotions get the best of him. Immediately following the speech, all of the major networks and news channels had their own experts and responses to the speech. These days, we have no shortage of speech!

Our passage today is the longest speech on speech in the Bible. It uses many words to illustrate the power of words. In some ways, what James says is not very enlightening. We all know that words have great power, and that the language we use can go a long ways to either blessing or cursing, to building up or tearing

down. That doesn't mean we don't need to hear the message again, but at first glance, it seems like something we know very well already, thank you.

This passage is often used to warn against the dangers of gossip. It seems that wherever two or more are gathered, there is a tendency towards gossip. One of the quotable quotes in the Harrodsburg Herald recently was from Thomas Fuller: "Even doubtful accusations leave a stain behind them." These 17th century words echo our passage from James, where we read that the tongue "stains the whole body." One of the best illustrations of this that I have seen recently is the movie "Doubt." In it, Meryl Streep plays Mother Superior at a convent and Catholic school. She suspects the new priest of improper behavior with the young boys, and tells the other nuns to be on the lookout for anything unusual or out of the ordinary. Without making a direct accusation, her words immediately put doubts and suspicions in the minds of the other nuns, and the drama escalates from there. There is no clear proof of any wrongdoing, and the audience itself is unsure of whether or not any indiscretion has actually taken place. But in the end, the priest is removed from his post and relocated. His placement is no longer tenable because of the permanent stain left by the doubtful accusations.

In the midst of this tension, the priest preaches a homily and tells the following story: "A woman was gossiping with her friend about a man whom they hardly knew - I know none of you have ever done this. That night, she had a

dream: a great hand appeared over her and pointed down on her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O' Rourke, and she told him the whole thing. 'Is gossiping a sin?'... 'Was that God Almighty's hand pointing down at me? ... Father, have I done something wrong?' 'Yes,' Father O' Rourke answered her. 'Yes, you ignorant, badly-brought-up female. You have blamed false witness on your neighbor. You played fast and loose with his reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed.' So, the woman said she was sorry, and asked for forgiveness. 'Not so fast,' says O' Rourke. 'I want you to go home, take a pillow upon your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me.' ...[She did this, and then] went back to the old parish priest as instructed. 'Did you cut the pillow with a knife?' he says. 'Yes, Father.' 'And what were the results?' 'Feathers,' she said. 'Feathers?' he repeated. 'Feathers; everywhere, Father.' 'Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather....' 'Well,' she said, 'it can't be done. I don't know where they went. The wind took them all over.' 'And that,' said Father O' Rourke, 'is gossip!'"

The warning against gossip is an important one, and certainly something that we need to hear repeatedly, but to boil this passage down to the local level misses the bigger point that James is trying to make. James says that speech is powerful - almost cosmically so. He opens this diatribe with a warning to would-be teachers, saying, "Not many of you should become teachers...for you know that we who

teach will be governed with greater strictness." This certainly isn't the Scripture to use to recruit volunteers for Christian Education, is it? But it is often the case that teachers, preachers, and those in positions of public leadership are held to higher expectations because of the example we set. These expectations often extend to the family members – spouses and children. Like it or not, more eyes are on individuals who hold public positions of leadership, and as a result, our speech has an even greater impact that we care to realize.

What teachers say has more authority. "I learned it in school," or "the teacher told me so," is often sufficient justification for any of our knowledge. In church, we sing "the Bible tells me so," but much of our Biblical knowledge comes from what our preachers and Sunday school teachers have said the Bible says. One of the warnings we read in this passage is that "we all make many mistakes." That should come as no surprise, of course, but for teachers of the faith this can be especially dangerous. Another "Quotable Quote" was from Susan B. Anthony: "I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires." We must always be aware of our own limits in knowledge and understanding, and be honest about them. When we get too confident in our own speech, or speak too surely on behalf of God, we also misuse our tongue.

Teachers are held accountable for what they say and for what they don't say, what they teach and what they don't teach. Just as we misuse our tongue when we claim too much authority or certainty, we also misuse our tongue when we fail to spread the gospel message. If we don't use our tongues for instructing and encouragement, we are failing in our responsibility. We want to see more people walking through our church doors each Sunday, but at times it can be tempting for us to assure them, "Don't worry - we don't ask much of you here." As for mysteries, there are many mysteries of faith, often made more mysterious by what we read in the Bible. It is a common temptation for us preachers and teachers to make those mysteries plain, to explain how what we believe is really easy to believe, and doesn't shake our foundation in any real way. When we try to water down the Word of God, to make it easier to digest, we also misuse the tongue.

Lest all of the focus fall on those who teach in an official capacity, let me assure you that we are all teachers in one way or another. Last week we wrapped up the Confirmation class for our youth. Though most people here didn't teach the class, everyone sitting in here right now is a teacher to these youth. As members of this community of faith, you will pledge to nurture these youth in their discipleship, to help teach them, instruct them in their vocabulary of faith. Similarly, to people who are not in the church, to those looking in from the outside, each person here is an authority on what it means to be a Christian, simply in virtue

of being here in church. Unfortunately, I have known many people who have been turned off by the church and turned away from faith simply because of what they saw from Christians. They heard a message about God's love but saw something else entirely when they looked at what Christians said and did.

Ultimately, that is James' primary concern in this letter: that what we say and do, the way that we live our lives and act in the world, should reflect what we say we believe. It should bear witness to what we know in Jesus Christ. It is a daunting task, and sometimes it might seem better just to keep our mouths shut! Sometimes that is the right move. But to simply stay quiet misses the flip side of what James argues in this chapter. Speech is powerful and important. In chapter 1, James gives the instruction, "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." It doesn't say "just listen and keep your mouth shut!" James charges us to use our speech judiciously, for blessing others. We should use our speech to instruct, to encourage, and to build up. Even anger can be righteous and important. If we are angered by injustice, by speech and actions that are contrary to the Gospel, that should compel us to speak out, to use the gift and power of the words that God gives us to speak the truth in love.

Let us pray that we will be still and listen for God's voice in our lives, and that God would give us the wisdom, the courage, and the discernment to speak.