

this would be a good family movie. Well, it was violent and gory. Charlotte, who was six or seven at the time, was sitting on the edge of her seat and I asked her if she needed to go out. I debated whether we should just leave, but we stayed.

When we got home, Charlotte said, "Daddy, you are a bad parent for taking a little kid to see that movie. Now I am going to have nightmares." It made me angry because I knew that I was a bad daddy. I knew that I was wrong, but I said, "Charlotte, I asked you if you wanted to go out (meaning, 'It's not my fault') and now you are just going to have to deal with it." To which she answered, "I was just sharing my feelings." I knew that I had wounded her spirit with my words. The tongue is full of deadly poison.

With a sharp word, a cutting remark, a quick quip, an offhand comment, we can kill the spirit.

"The tongue is a small member . . . with it we curse (even in church)."

*Did you see what she was wearing in church today? I don't know what some people are thinking. You would think with the money that they have, she could afford a decent outfit to wear to church.*

*Some people just don't know how to act. If they are going to let their children cut up during the sermon, they just ought to stay home and watch it on TV.*

*I sure hope he's listening to this sermon. Lord knows he needs to hear this message. Of course, it won't do any good. If he was going to change, he would have done it a long time ago. Good sermons are just wasted on some people. Amen, preacher! This good*

*sermon is just being wasted on him.*

*Praise the Lord!*

"With the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so."

Words can hurt. But words can heal. Jesus was passing quickly through town. He knew who the town bully was. He knew the one name that everyone spoke under their breath. As Jesus passed through, there he was, the town bully, up in the sycamore tree.

It would have been easy to call him down. I don't mean literally call him down from the tree. I mean figuratively call him down, to cut him down to size. But instead, Jesus said words that healed. "Zacchaeus, come down. I must stay at your house today." I don't know how Zacchaeus heard those words. But what I hear is, "Neither do I condemn you."

Maybe one of the reasons it is so easy for us to condemn is because we have never really heard those words ourselves. "Neither do I condemn you."

I want you to hear them today. Hear them in the depths of your being. Hear them so that you can offer those same words to someone this week. They will be healing words.

"The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits."



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# The Pulpit Ministry



September 17, 2006  
Fifteenth Sunday of Kingdomtide

Words Can Heal  
and Hurt

James 3:1-12

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“The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. . . . 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.”

Jesus was teaching in the temple one day. The crowd had gathered around him. Suddenly there was a commotion and the leaders were pushing and shoving their way through the crowd. Jesus stopped talking and looked up. The leaders burst into the inner circle, huffing and puffing, and pushed a woman forward into the center of attention. “This woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.”

Can you imagine a more awkward moment? All eyes turned towards Jesus. Do something, Jesus! Say something, Jesus! But whatever you do or say will be used against you.

Of course you know what Jesus did and said. After a while, no one was left but Jesus and the woman. Then he said the most healing words he could have said. Do you remember what he said? “Neither do I condemn you.”

My guess is that she had never heard those words before; she had been condemned her whole life. My intuition is that she desperately needed to hear those exact words. My fantasy is that she was transformed.

“The tongue is a small member. . . . With it we bless.”

“The tongue is a small member. . . . With it we curse.”

It was after Lazarus had died. Jesus had gotten word that Lazarus was sick and had time to get there before he died, but he

didn't. When Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus was already dead and the family was grieving. Martha said it first. Mary said it too. They had obviously said it to each other. It was what they were thinking. It was honest. But it hurt. Do you remember what they said? “If you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

I don't know what they intended. But what I hear is judgment, blame, and condemnation.

“The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.”

James understood. “Not many of you should become teachers my brothers and sisters,” James says, “(Because) we all make many mistakes.” Teachers are expected to speak. Teachers are expected to have something to say. “Just say a few words.” I hear that a lot. People imagine that I have a few words in my pocket.

*Have words, will travel!* “Just say a few words.” But what is really meant is, “Say a few words that are meaningful, helpful, insightful, creative, and if possible, humorous, but never, ever say anything that is hurtful.”

“Not many of you should become teachers my brothers and sisters.” Because when we make mistakes with our words, it hurts. I was taking a class called Foundations of Counseling. The very first day of class, the teacher came into the room and wrote on the board, “Do no harm.” That is the first rule of counseling. Words can hurt.

Jesus was in the region of Caesarea Philippi and he asked, “Who do the people say that the son of man is?” Peter gave the right answer. But then, he misspoke.

Maybe it was because he was flush with the confidence of knowing. Maybe it was because he saw himself as the leader of the group. Maybe it was because he thought he was expected to say something. He said it without giving it a second thought. He meant well. He wasn't sure at the time what he had said wrong. But what he said cut Jesus to the core of his identity. “Get behind me Satan,” Jesus said, “you are a stumbling block to me.”

“Not many of you should become teachers my brothers and sisters.” James was writing to the church scattered. He was concerned with authentic faith, genuine Christianity, religion with integrity, faith that works. For James, Christianity with integrity includes disciplined speech.

Listen again to James' words:  
1:19, “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak.”  
1:26, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues . . . their religion is worthless.”  
4:11, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters.”  
5:9, “Beloved, do not grumble against one another.”  
5:12, “Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth, or by any other oath.”  
3:8, “(The tongue) is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

I asked Charlotte permission to tell this story. I think it was last summer that we took our children to the Orpheum to one of the Friday night movies. The movie was *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Denise and I remembered the prequel, *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and we thought