

Bite My Tongue!
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
September 20, 2009

Reading: James 3: 1-12 (J. B. Phillips translation)

Don't aim at adding to the number of teachers, my brothers, I beg you! Remember that we who are teachers will be judged by a much higher standard.

We all make mistakes in all kinds of ways, but the man who can claim that he never says the wrong thing can consider himself perfect, for if he can control his tongue he can control every other part of his personality! Men control the movements of a large animal like the horse with a tiny bit placed in its mouth. Ships too, for all their size and momentum they have with a strong wind behind them, are controlled by a very small rudder according to the course chosen by the helmsman. The human tongue is physically small, but what tremendous effects it can boast of! A whole forest can be set ablaze by a tiny spark of fire, and the tongue is as dangerous as any fire, with vast potentialities for evil. It can poison the whole body, it can make the whole of life a blazing hell.

Beasts, birds, reptiles and all kinds of sea-creatures can be, and in fact are, tamed by man, but no one can tame the human tongue. It is an evil always liable to break out, and the poison it spreads is deadly. We use the tongue to bless our Father, God, and we use the same tongue to curse our fellow men, who are all created in God's likeness. Blessings and curses come out of the same mother – surely my brothers (and sisters), this is the sort of thing that never ought to happen! Have you ever known a spring to give sweet and bitter water simultaneously? Have you ever seen a fig tree with a crop of olives, or seen figs growing on a vine? It is just as impossible for a spring to give fresh and salt water at the same time.¹

South Carolina's representative to the United States House of
Representatives, Joe Wilson, yelled out during President Obama's speech

¹ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1952), pp. 481-481.

to the joint chambers of Congress on health care reform, “You lie!” Mr. Obama was referencing the fact that proposed legislation would not provide health care for illegal immigrants. Mr. Wilson has apologized to the President but not to the House of Representatives for his lack of civility. In turn, the House has reprimanded Mr. Wilson.

We have watched so called “town hall meetings” break down into angry shouting matches between citizens who are ignorant or ill informed about the health care reform issues. Most disturbing is the fact that many of the people who went to these events were prompted by politicians to disrupt what would hopefully be an informative meeting. Denise Dennis, reporting for the Huffington Post, asked a belligerent “why he and his companions wouldn’t stop shouting so others could speak and be heard, he shouted that it was his right to yell under the “first amendment.” I then asked why he couldn’t respect the first amendment rights of others and he answered by glaring at me and walking away.”² During similar events in Tampa and St. Louis arrests were made on charges of assault.

In the midst of all of this I have never heard political and economic terms used so irresponsibly; terms such as Nazis, fascist, socialist, and

² Denise Dennis, “Right Wingers Wreak Havoc on Philadelphia Town Meeting,” August 3, 2009; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/denise-dennis/right-wingers-wreak-havoc_b_24987.html?view=print, downloaded September 16, 2009.

communist. The nation needs a history and civics lesson on these and other ideas. If you do not know what such terms mean you ought not be allowed to use them, especially if your purpose is not to advance a rational argument but to insert fear into the national conversation.

Other tongues have been wagging unabated these past few weeks. Serena Williams cursed the line judge at the U.S. Open in what can be described as nothing less than a vicious diatribe. Her rant is not the stuff of champions and she not only shamed herself but the sport of tennis as well. Kanye West also made a fool of himself at the Video Music Awards ceremony. Taylor Swift had been awarded the best video for her song “You Belong to Me,” having won over Beyonce’s “Single Ladies.” Taylor had started thanking people when West rushed the stage, grabbed the microphone out of Taylor’s hands and went on a rant declaring that Beyonce’s video was the best. Taylor’s chance to thank her supporters was cut off.

And finally to John and Kate, zip your lips. Your sadomasochistic war of words is not redemptive for you personally and has no social value. And shame on photographers, television producers, newspapers, web casters, magazines, and radio personalities for twisting personal tragedy

into venues of public voyeurism and entertainment. And that goes for you, too, Dr. Phil.

I am certain that St. James had none of this in mind when he wrote this letter to the Christian Jews of the Diaspora. His biggest concern was the tremendous responsibility that belongs to people who teach. Teachers of the gospel bear tremendous accountability for the truth they are charged with representing. From the very beginnings of the Christian movement there was great worry that some would distort the truth of Jesus and misrepresent the Kingdom of God. We read about this problem throughout the letters of the New Testament. The way in which the life and teachings of Jesus are presented in the 21st century is equally disturbing and requires constant vigilance by the community of faith. Something as small as the human tongue can warp or destroy the faith of men and women. Gossip can destroy careers and congregations.

James could never have imagined a democracy such as the one we live in. But I firmly believe that the threats he saw for the early church are as potentially dangerous for our republic. I believe that the greater threat to democracy is not Islamic terrorists or Chinese communists, but the loss of a civil and rational tongue. The failure of reasoned discourse in the United States is more likely to undermine human freedom than

nuclear missiles in North Korea or Iran. When the prophets of the Hebrew Bible declared there is no truth in the public square they knew that the downfall of the nation was imminent.

As a registered Democrat I don't mind telling you that I miss the conservative voices of Elliot Richardson and William F. Buckley. I did not always agree with them, but I could expect to hear from them a solid and rational case for the positions they held. I find it disturbing to hear men like Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh utter mendacious statements that are not meant to explain an issue but to sway public opinion polls and manipulate public fear. There has never been a greater need in American history for the restoration of public dialogue on civic matters ranging from education, health care, regulation of finance, war, and many others. Civil dialogue is a civic virtue on which the future of the nation depends.

We do not need to talk faster, communicate with greater speed, twitter, email, or Face book. We need, rather, to speak with deeper deliberation. We do not need to speak in truncated sentences or cryptic words. Let us return all of the vowels to our words, and nouns and verbs to our sentences. We need to take our time and lay down our arguments with common sense lines of defense. We do not need more applications on our cell phones. We desperately need purposeful public discourse.

There is a poison that is turning the sweet waters of democracy into bitter springs of disrespect and violent dissertation. Not for a moment would I want to infringe on any other person's free speech rights. But unless we recover a responsible civil tongue our nation will drown in vitriol. Free speech is predicated on responsible speech. Jesus ben Sirach speaks of this wisdom in the Apocrypha (Sirach 28: 12-14, NRSV):

“If you blow on a spark, it will glow;
if you spit on it, it will be put out;
yet both come out of your mouth.

Curse the gossips and the double-tongued,
for they destroy the peace of many.
Slander has shaken many,
and scattered them from nation to nation.
It has destroyed strong cities,
and overturned the households of the great.

Slander has driven virtuous women from their homes,
And deprived them of the fruit of their toil

Those who pay heed to slander will not find rest,
nor will they settle down in peace.
The blow of a whip raises a welt,
but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.

Many have fallen by the edge of the sword,
But not as many as have fallen because of the tongue.

Now the truth that James teaches, which is found throughout the Bible, is that the tongue communicates what is in the heart. The Psalmist

declared that those who dwell on the holy hill of God are “Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their hearts; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.” (Ps. 15: 1b-3)

Likewise, Jesus declared:

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from the bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” (Luke 6: 43-45 NRSV)

While we might counsel the nation on right speech we must also ponder what is in the hearts of our citizens. I am not suggesting that every citizen be a Christian, much less a Congregationalist. In fact, I do not presume that a responsible citizen must be of any religious persuasion at all. But I do believe that a civil tongue springs from a civil heart; a heart that cherishes the Constitution and Bill of Rights for every citizen of this nation, a heart that respects the human dignity of every person, and a heart that honors the diversity of opinions and ideas that enrich the democratic tradition. A civil tongue wells from the civic heart that embraces the common good over selfish enterprise and greed. A civil heart places the values of justice and equity before all economic theories, be they capitalist

or socialist. A civil heart recognizes the value of moderation so that all may share in common goods and necessities. The communal heart treasures the basic national resources found in farmlands, forests, rivers and streams. The social conscience embraces the ways and means of peace, utterly rejecting the fallacy that peace can be achieved by means of violence. And I think that the abundant heart of a citizen is open to disagreement without censure, dissension without vitriol, and civil disobedience without shame.

I am wondering what it might look like for the Christian church, and this church in particular, to lead the way in cultivating the civil heart and civil tongue. Why is that a church responsibility? It is a church responsibility because the very roots of freedom are deeply planted in our history and tradition. The real history of the Jewish and Christian traditions, and our respective theologies, begins with the Exodus. There can be no doubt that the covenant that God promised to Abraham expressed itself in the demand that Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go. The premise of God is that no human being shall be the slave of another person, party, ideology, or economic power. God's free people shall not bow their knees to any body or any thing. And as flawed and frustrating

as American democracy can be, I believe that it remains the greatest expression of the freedom that God means for human beings to enjoy. If we do not tend the basics of democracy we will dissolve the very freedoms that make life worth living – the very freedoms God wills for us. We will be captives in a foreign land making mud bricks for taskmasters who are charged with ever-greater quotas.

As we think about claiming a unique outreach project to our community may I propose that we consider the reclamation of civic dialogue? I do not mean that we would abandon the service that we render to organizations like the Kansas Food Bank, Youthville, Habitat for Humanity, and the Lord's Diner. By all means, let us serve them with robust generosity of our time, talent, and financial support. I mean this morning to offer an idea that we might consider. Such an idea would require much thought, research, and discussion. Specific goals and tactics would need to be identified. We would need to network with significant community partners such as colleges and universities, public school systems, other congregations, and yes, even political parties. It would need to finally be approved by the congregation.

As a minister charged with prophetic responsibilities, both within the church and in the community, I worry that the demise of fair speech in

the public square will bring every other important and necessary reform to still birth or malformation. We cannot have right relations with other religions in our community if we do not know how to talk with one another. The case for the environment cannot be judged if every corporation trying to prove that it is now “green” blitzes the citizens. Ecological security will only flower into maturity when citizens at every level of society have been given an opportunity to express and hear the evidence of need and solution. We will never have peace when we are awed by the images of laser guided missiles cruising down a street in Baghdad seeking the front door of an enemy target. We will only have peace when ordinary men and women of differing religions, cultures, and political orientations can sit down together and communicate with one another as men and women, mothers and fathers, laborers and managers, farmers and technicians. The examples are countless, and I am sure you get the point. Real security in every sphere of our lives requires the cultivation of civic discourse in every sphere of our nation.

This is an idea. It is an invitation to dialogue. Let’s talk about it!

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