

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Strengthening Our Core”

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Judges 11:29-36, James 3:1-12

She was my favorite grandmother. She was the one who would invite my brothers and me over to spend the night and allow us to stay up late. She was the one who would let us climb the large tree in her front yard. She was the one who would take us to the neighborhood pool each summer and let us swim to our hearts content while she sweltered in the Houston summer. She was the one who would fix us BLTs and give us cold Cokes on a warm summer day. She was the one on whose floor I lay while we all watched Neil Armstrong step out of the lunar lander and become the first man on the moon. She was also a good Southern Baptist. For almost fifty years she taught kindergarten Sunday school at her beloved South Main Baptist Church. And yet, even with all of that...well one day when I was about 16 and had started working on Sundays so I could put gas in my 56' Chevy, she asked why I did that and did not go to church. Before my brain could engage, these words came out of my mouth. “God isn't real so why should I go to church.” The hurt look on her face said more than words could have ever conveyed. And to this day I regret having done that.

Maybe it is just me, but over the years I have said things, things have come out of my mouth, that I not only wondered where they came from but I regretted saying. But to be sure it is just me, let's take a poll. How many of you have ever said something that you regretted, that you wish you could take back...that hurt someone? OK, so I am not alone. The question is why do we do it? Why is it that we are capable of using our tongues to utter such hurtful things? After all we know the old saying, “If you can't say something nice about someone....” (...don't say anything at all) No not that one, the one from the play Steel Magnolias, “If you can't say something nice about someone, come sit next to me.” Which for me is the explanation; that there is something inherently satisfying about saying things that tear down or hurt others. Sure we know that we are not supposed to do it, but if we are honest...at least in the moment we utter those things...there is power in them. For a moment we have the upper hand. Otherwise, why would we do it?

The issue though with allowing our tongues to be unfettered by our brains and moral compasses, is that it brings about hurt and harm. One of the great Old Testament stories about this is the one we read from Judges this morning. Jephthah is a judge, and by the way, judges were charismatic leaders raised up by God and the people, to help save the people of Israel from their enemies. Anyway, Jephthah had been asked by the elders of Israel to defend them from the Ammonites who had attacked them. He agreed and led a force which fought its way through a number of smaller enemies in order to take on the Ammonites. Prior to the main battle however, Jephthah allowed his mouth to speak without engaging his brain. He swore an oath that if God gave him victory he would sacrifice whomever was first out of the gate of his city upon his victorious return. Never mind that this oath violated everything God stood for, but he made it. When Jephthah finally returned home, the first person out of the gate was his only child, his daughter whom he loved. His words spoken without thinking ended in great harm.

This is the point that James is trying to make. We can only imagine what sort of church James is working with if his description of the tongue are any indication of the internal life of the community. Listen

again. A tongue makes great boasts. The tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body and sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly passion. With the tongue we praise God and with it we curse human beings who have been made in the image of God's likeness. Out of the same mouth comes praise and cursing. I wish I could say that things have changed after James' words but they haven't. Churches, businesses, organizations are still torn apart by hurtful words spoken in the heat of the moment, or spoken deliberately to wound. We still curse others while we are headed down I-95. There is still admiration and support for particular politicians who "speak their minds" completely unfiltered by whom they would harm with their speech. It is almost as if people wish they could say those things and not regret them like their political favorites.

If we allow James to speak to us this morning we know that this is not how we are supposed to be. We are to be different. Yet, the question is, how do we become different? How do we work at not allowing our tongues to set the world on fire? The answer is hinted at in James. We are to work on our core. When we usually speak about working on our core, we mean on our abs, trying to get that six-pack look...rather than the one large pack like I've got. But here I mean working on the core of our being, on our heart of hearts that guides what we say and do. It means working on the core of our spiritual orientation. James hints at this when he says that we cannot tame our tongues and that salt spring cannot produce fresh water. In other words, what comes out of our mouths is an indication of what is at the core of our beings; what is in our hearts. Are our hearts full of fear, anger, anxiety and hate? Then our mouths will produce one set of words. Are our hearts filled with the joy, peace, patience and love of God? Then our mouths will produce something else. In essence then by working on our core being, through worship, prayer and acts of kindness, we can become the spring of fresh water and our tongues will produce what they should.

The challenge for us then is not to try in vain to control our tongues, but it is instead to work on our core beings. It is to work on our hearts so that they are oriented toward God in Christ in such a way that what comes out of our mouths is the fresh clean life giving water of God. In order to help us do just that I am offering you this morning a simple prayer...a prayer that I would have you use as a mantra each day; morning, noon and night. It is this, Lord on this day help my mouth to bless and not curse. That is all. No long complicated prayer. Just a request each day for God to take control of our tongues and use them to bless. It is an exercise for our spiritual core that will assist us in changing how we use the voices that God has given us.