

Calvary United Methodist Church  
September 23, 2018

## **THE TERRIBLE TONGUE!**

Rev. Dr. Robert Cook

### **Children's Message:**

James 3:1-18

I'll ask for our kids to come forward. I love spending time with our kids. How are you doing? (Good!) Pop right down here, I love it. That's great. How was your week? (Good!) School going pretty good for you? (Good!) Having any problems? (Good!) Good problems? That's good. How are you? (Good.) I'm glad. Blankets are very special, aren't they? Yep. We had one just like that and I just loved it. It was great too.

Has anyone taught you the Golden Rule? Do you know the Golden Rule? You think you do? Okay. (Child speaks.) You are doing good. Very good. I have a whole group of people out here who will help you with the Golden Rule right now because they are going to tell it to you, alright? Are you ready? You tell them the Golden Rule: (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.) Okay, do that once more so they get it. What is it? (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.) Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

You wouldn't go to your brother's bed and mess it all up, right? Say ha-ha. Right? (Maybe.) Maybe? Well then he would do that to you. You wouldn't say, "Yeah, I messed up my plate, you take it." You wouldn't do that. You wouldn't want someone to do it to you. So, we care for one another.

The Golden Rule is so easy to remember. It is: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It comes from Jesus, right? And if we could do that, if we could treat kids, like you take a school bus? Do you go on a school bus? You do. What if you treated kids on the school bus the way you want to be treated? Alright? So a girl sits next to you, right. Has that happened? Yep. Not to you? No. Well, let's say you treated her very very nicely. That's important, the way you want to be treated.

Let me extend that to another place, alright? I have a basket here of things. So I have old water bottles, I have an old cup that was used, a fork, a straw, baggie, Styrofoam plate, bowl, paper. What becomes of all of these? We throw them out. Now, if you are paying attention, you see at the bottom this little triangle? See the triangle? That's a recycle signal, right, so you can recycle this. This could become a chair or it could become all kinds of stuff, right? (Child speaks.) It could. It can do all that stuff. And these can be recycled here. This could be recycled. Now, what happens if (Child speaks.) I know, but, now, a lot of plastics don't get recycled, so this straw is becoming one of the biggest problems as like half a billion straws that people use and throw away and they will be in landfills for 1000 years or more before they break down. I'm impressed. You see, that's a way of caring for your neighbors, isn't it. So if we care for our neighbors with our words, with discipling or treating them nice on the school

bus or caring for our sisters or brothers at home, that's exactly what Jesus wants us to do and that's why we call it the Golden Rule.

And I bet if I ask they'll tell you the Golden Rule all over again and this time you say it with them, ok? Ready? 1, 2, 3: Do until others as you would have them do unto you. That's the rule. If you do this the world will be a better place and you'll help make it one.

So, let's pray: Jesus, thank you for this word that if we treat others the way we want to be treated we can make the world a better place. Thanks for our kids. Thanks for the efforts they have at recycling. Thanks for the way that they care for other people. Help us to make the world a better place. Amen.

Thank you so much! I'm so impressed you do really well.

**Message:**

Mark 8:27-38

Thank you, men's choir and Dave and Deb. Good music.

Would you join me in a word of prayer? So, Lord, help us to hear from you today. I pray you will use my words as small, little as they are. I pray that you will touch our hearts with your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Why do we, in this enlightened day, continue to read and study from texts from such ancient times, times so vastly different from our own? After all the social settings hardly compare. The ways in which patriarchy dominated all segments of society and in fact perhaps as many as 60 percent of the world's population in the Mediterranean world and probably up at the India and probably places north were in some form of involuntary servitude or even slavery. The technology, the medicine, the science, vastly primitive in comparison with what we have today. We don't have nearly as much as we would like. Twenty percent of the population worldwide back then probably could read or write. Eighty percent could not.

So why do we look upon these ancient book as a primary guide for our contemporary spiritual and moral life? Much has to do with how this book came about. This book comes about after failure and pain and hardship. It is based on the writings from the Hebrew tradition. These were gathered by the remnant people of Israel, six centuries before the time of Jesus; people who were carried away en masse as slaves to Babylon. There in Babylon they refused to believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, Ruth, that they had abandoned their people, that God had abandoned their people. They refused to believe that. They refused to believe that God was no god at all. And so what they did was they scoured the ancient writings they had going all the way back to Moses and the stories they had from Abraham and the early fathers and mothers of Israel. And as they scoured these old scrolls to search out the narrative of their journey as a people, they began to pen, to edit, to write, to interpret their stories based on these scrolls and their experience, because they wanted to tell their children

who they were and who they needed to be in this world, because God had called them as God's people. And one day they would return to their homeland and when they did, they would need a resource for them to remember who they are.

So, they did and the children of Israel did go back to their homeland and they stepped back from their work and what they saw took their breath away, that seeing their narrative as a continuous story for the very first time, they realized that God was in those old scrolls, that God was in all of those experiences, that God was there with those scribes and scholars as they put them together and they believed that God had a purpose for them in their captivity and their children did need to know these stories and they saw a red thread of salvation running through every story they found. As it continues to be because as we read this book, we realize that God is not done with humanity yet.

I know, some people believe the Bible is without error and every word and letter comes from the hand of God as though it was just dropped onto the earth and they have a word for this. It's called inerrancy. It's a difficult point to prove to be honest with you. And it's not an argument you'll find in the pages of the Bible. It's actually a 20<sup>th</sup> century argument that fundamentalists and evangelical scholars brought up as a political means and for them that was what they needed to do.

Doesn't take a seminary degree to realize as you read this book there are some places that are difficult, that area problematic; some that are confusing. And you'll find that each of the books or letters or writings in the Bible have a cultural shell around them that they come out of a time when their writers, their editors, put them together with their own particular prospective, their understanding, their culture and you have to take that into account.

Now, think about this, because we do believe that enslaving human beings is wrong. We believe that the role and treatment of women, the education of children, the exclusion of racial, ethnic, gender minorities really needs to be rethought. And this actually comes about through a study of this book, through the Gospels, the stories of Moses. One of the best on exclusion is the Book of Ruth, which you least expect, but it's a beautiful book. And certainly the stories of Jesus talk about this because we see that Jesus treated all people as worthy children of God.

Now, there are things in the Bible that are literal, that are poetic, that are metaphoric, that are allegorical. Psalmist speaks of God riding on the wings of the wind; that's obviously poetry. In the Ten Commandments it says "Thou shalt not..." that's pretty literal. When it says, "Thou shalt not steal," don't steal. "Thou shalt not kill," don't kill. And so forth. That's literal. It's not hard to understand. But you do have to be careful of literalisms. You may have heard about this, about the guy who said: I'm going to leave every word in the Bible, I'm going to take my finger, I'm going to do whatever it says. And it said, "Judas hung himself." Ok, maybe I'm wrong on that one. He turned the page, said I'm going to do whatever this says and it said, "Go thou and do likewise." Okay. There may be some problem for literalism as you might see.

The Bible is inspired, I believe that, but the Bible is transmitted through human experience. So, rather than get stuck in arguments that lead nowhere like inerrance, you are a literalist, let me just suggest that you take the Bible seriously and that is to have a high view of scripture. A high view of scripture is important. A low view of scripture would say that it doesn't really matter. It doesn't do what it is supposed to do. That's when you hit this thing too much.

Having a high view of scripture means that you take it seriously and you value it. Take Jesus. Jesus was trained as a rabbi. He was a rustic rabbi. He was a Galilean rabbi. But he was a rabbi. Now a rabbi learns the entire corpus of what we call our Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, by heart. Every word. Well, kids going to Hebrew school to learn for their bar mitzvah would learn the entire corpus of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy by heart. So you have that story of Jesus, I think I can find it here, we have the story of Jesus, and thank you in the back there, I appreciate it. He's there in the temple. His mother and father are looking for him disparately. Where in the world did this kid go? And they find him there with the scholars in the temple debating. What is he doing? He's studying for his bar mitzvah. He took scripture seriously and so should we.

So we can say this about scripture: that the Bible is sufficient for all matters of faith and inspiration. It may not inform us about science. It will inform us about the ethics of science. It may not inform us about a lot of things that we have yet to work on, but it will inform us about our moral center, about our spiritual center. Now, that's not my view alone. That's the view of many over the course of Jewish and Christian history and practice. And they along with myself believe that people who regularly interact with scripture really do think deeply about contemporary issues and they will look for something that will help them have a strong moral center, that people who interact with the scriptures will think deeply about the status and role of women, about racism, about immigration, about sexism, about LGBTQI discrimination, about the treatment of pets, about the ethical treatment of the world and the environment and the climate.

So, scripture informs us on these issues. We have passed laws based on our understanding about scripture has influenced us. And I have to say that if you are going to progress in a spiritual life, you cannot do it well apart from this book. There are lots of resources. I have a library full of them and you probably too, but this book is our primary book for matters of faith and inspiration to guide us about our lives. So our reading today from the Book of James is a case in point on how to understand that a high view of scripture is important. And that's because the Bible speaks to human nature. Human nature has not changed since the writing of this book until right now and probably long before then and people are people, the same then as we are now.

So, James is a very observant pastor and he knows that the kind of transformation that must take place in our lives takes a long time. It takes a lifetime. He spent time in this letter writing how genuine faith has to progress and that it will have fruit to show for its progression and it will be shown by living out the generosity of the kind like God has given to us in Jesus and Je-

sus has given to us in love. And that's a really important part of what he is saying in this letter.

But then he goes to a very specific place. He is going to talk about taming the tongue. The tongue is a fairly small muscle, but it has the power to do great good or great harm. James understands that the taming of the tongue is an ongoing battle because he knows this first hand. He makes a point, as you have heard read, or you can read later on, that those who are teachers should be careful what we say and teach, whether you are standing up here, teaching Sunday school, small group or whatever, we who teach God's Word will be much more accountable because our words affect more people and anytime we teach we should keep in mind that we will be held responsible for our words. And James includes himself in this, too. He says we all stumble in many ways. He understands that we are growing, but we have not yet matured. But he also tells us, "Don't underestimate the power of the tongue, because if you do, you will not be able to tame it."

So, you understand, as I do, that if you control the tongue it will direct your whole life into what is acceptable in God's sight, but if you don't do that, it's going to get you into a lot of trouble.

There's not a person here who hasn't experienced that. James' point is clear: that the tongue can be a deadly powerful force of good or evil, but if we do not use our tongues with great caution, we will be like spiritual arsonists lighting careless fires that will consume lots of things and get you and me into great trouble. You understand that.

He also points to an inconsistency that he sees in church: that Christians can sit in church, sing sweetly the hymns, pray beautifully the prayers and then no sooner get out the door they whisper, gossip and talk smack. Not that you or I have ever done that, right? Well, the mouth speaks of that which fills the heart. And he says a spring cannot bear both sweet water and salt water at the same time. And something would be very wrong if it could do that, but it doesn't. And so what he is saying is that we are growing into maturity, but some will choose to remain immature.

Where do you start? Well, for James, the place you start for taming the tongue is the heart. I will have to be honest: I have many failings in this department and sometimes I have been deeply embarrassed by my own words, careless, thoughtless and, well, we all have. But I'm not giving up on this going on to maturity thing and I do think that it really does begin with a high view of this; of taking it seriously; of studying scripture together and with a group is the best way to do it. In there you are going to find resources that will help you to keep that small but powerful member in check.

The Proverbs have a lot to say about it: even a fool, one of the Proverbs says, is thought wise if they just keep their mouth shut.

I do believe that God's Spirit, as you study the word, will bring forth scriptures just when you

need them, that will either put you in check, save you from a lot of embarrassment or later on bring you up short. You know the Golden rule; you share it with our kids and how important that is. They are not learning it any place else now but the home and here in church so it is really important that they understand that, but there is no area of our lives that we violate so often as our tongue. Obviously our words can do great good or big time harm. Remember the old camp song: They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love? We could also add: they will know we are Christians by our tongue. It's true. One of the best ways to show that you love God and neighbor is with the taming of the tongue. And I think you can take that literally and seriously. Amen.

Would you join me in prayer? Lord, I have many failings here and all of us do. I pray that you would help us and guide us so that through your Word, through our study together, through mutual support and encouragement, and sometimes even through confrontation, we will learn how to control our tongue. Bless each one here. Amen.







