

Sermon Text for Sunday July 20, 2014

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 120:1-4, James 3:2-12

“Silence is golden”

I had a wonderful silent retreat in Alaska, but it is so nice to be back. More than any other time away, I really missed all of you. Being gone for 20 days out of the last 30 is a lot, it really is a lot. I was surprised by a few things at the retreat. It wasn't a monastery like I had thought, it was a Roman Catholic Retreat center, which was fine. It was also a bi-lingual silent retreat. I told that to my friend in Alaska and he thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard. I learned to be silent in two different languages. I also knew that I was not in Kansas anymore when during the orientation the first caution they gave us was that a mother bear and her cubs were seen roaming around the grounds of the center so do not go on the stations of the cross by yourself. That kind of set the mood, then the second warning was that our bedrooms lock by themselves once we leave the room so make sure you take your key with you when you leave.

Then we were set loose on our own to be in silence from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon. That first evening I determined that all the time I had alone which was not scheduled I would spend reading Scripture, which I stuck to pretty good. So on the first night I read Scripture until about 11:30 and I went to the bathroom which was right next to my bedroom and it was really nice because I could quickly sneak in there in my boxer shorts and not have to worry about getting dressed, even though there were room all around me, but they were much farther away from the bathroom. So I quickly darted into the bathroom and as I released the door handle of my room and it closed, I heard a click that reminded me of the words that they told us at orientation: Your door will lock behind you so make sure you take your key with you. I was in my boxer shorts one foot in the bathroom, aware that I had done a really bad thing.

I considered picking the lock of my bedroom, which I could have done, but decided I didn't quite have the tools I needed and it would create too much noise and bring people out of their rooms. So I went down into the first floor to the floor and broke my silence with the words: I locked myself out of my room. The man came over, let me into my room.

It wasn't a great start, but it got better. At the end of our time on Sunday afternoon we did a debrief and I mentioned that I led dozens of retreat, been to many more and even though I didn't have a single conversation with the 35 participants who were there, the bond that was

created in that silence was powerful. We ate together, we prayed together, we saw each other around the grounds, we worshipped together and sang songs together. Not a word was spoken but a trust and a mutual respect was built up in such a way that words could have potentially have interfered.

At times words can be our worst enemies. Our Scriptures today define the tongue or our speech as being fiery arrows in Psalm 120 and James tells us that they are at the center of the mistakes that we make in our lives. With our words we have an uncanny knack to see things get out of control very quickly. We will learn today through the Word of God how important it is to control the tongue and how what we say is a reflection of our true heart as well as our relationship with our Savior.

We continue along in James as we pick up in verse 2 where we are told that we all make mistakes. He actually says, all of us make many mistakes and then there is a period, which is a good thing. Because normally when we hear, we all make mistakes we are saying it to make someone feel good or look better because the implication is we all make mistakes so don't worry about it. Not James, we all make many mistakes and then he goes on to say that at the center or at the core of those mistakes is the tongue.

He then moves from stating that our mistakes find their root in what we say to giving examples of how something so small is able to direct and control something so big. Our tongue which is so small is able to control our bodies and really who we are. For example, he tells us, the bridle is able to control the horse, for both good and bad. The first August we were in Strasburg we were still getting acclimated to the buggies and that was the year that we had an earthquake, a hurricane, a tornado, massive flooding and we were thinking what is this place.

On a warm August evening we had our windows open when we heard after midnight a terrible crash and bang on the street below. I rushed to the window and saw a buggy on its side and so I rushed downstairs, after I put on some clothes. A young woman jumped out of the buggy and then a young man and they calmed the horse down. I talked to the young man and he said I guess I was a bit sleepy. What happened was that there was a parked car and the horse missed the car, but not the buggy and one of its wheels went over the side of the car and left a terrible mark from top to bottom. This is the same car that was slammed into a few weeks ago and then the car went into the side of the Rickerts house. The bit in the mouth of that buggies horse didn't serve any purpose because the one guiding holding the reins had fallen asleep. Such a small piece of metal can steer to safety and to danger, as a rudder on a ship can do the same.

The point being here in James is that one can gain control of the whole by concentrating and controlling that small thing which is responsible for giving it direction. His point is that for humans, for us, our bridle, our rudder, that which controls the direction we take is our tongue. And this tongue is a small spark that can set an entire forest ablaze. So many metaphors and examples he uses all to stress the fact that the tongue has to be controlled by those who would call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

But isn't there something more to this Scripture in James than be careful little mouth what you say? There is. It is fairly common knowledge that in Lancaster County there is what some have called a culture of silence that is present in our culture, in our society. It is just uncomfortable to talk about issues that may be controversial or topics over which we may disagree. It has been called a culture of silence, and you know since we are smack dab in the center of Lancaster County First Presbyterian is not at all immune to this approach and this culture reality. If something could be seen as potentially controversial, or if it would rock the boat in any way, we just don't look forward to talking about it, we kind of avoid it. Instead we like to focus on something like mission, or a tulip fundraiser. Just something different and non-threatening and something we can all agree over.

That is not all bad. Now, hear me clearly, I am not in any way saying that James is in agreement with this. The title of the sermon, silence is golden, is not a call of affirmation for this culture of silence. Like Ecclesiastes states there is a time to keep silence and time to speak. He takes the other side of this issue and that is not the danger of silence, but the danger of the uncontrolled tongue. Loose lips sink ships, but in reality he states that loose lips actually ruin lives, split families, cause wars. Psalm 120 calls it lying lips. When we lived in Russia we noticed that the culture of silence was so very different there. People did not warmly open up about personal things because they were trained from the Soviet days that if you said the wrong thing that evening you could end up in Siberia. The tongue had the potential of sending a loved one far, far away. If you spoke to the wrong person then your tongue could get you in trouble. It was a lesson that continues to today in the form of paranoia and distrust of all people.

When we began our housing ministry in Russia we ran into a road block because we realized that contracts had no meaning whatsoever. People would never sign a contract because they didn't trust them. What is happening in the Ukraine with not only the civil war but with the tragic downing of the jet by Russian supporters, maybe even Russia itself, is a product of this

endemic distrust that people have because there is no loyalty to what is said and no follow through.

But James is not telling us to keep silent, he is not endorsing a culture of silence or saying that silence is golden. What he is focusing on is the control of the tongue, not the absence of it. You really can't talk about these Scriptures without using the word gossip. He brings verse 9 by speaking of how we can be dualistic. He says we can praise God but then curse our fellow human that God created. After the retreat I went with a friend on Prince William Sound and saw the glaciers that came right into the Sound. They were as pure as they could be, we caught shrimp right where they were coming in and that water was as pure and blue as you could imagine. James tells us you are either one or the other. You can't be a Christian on Sunday and someone people want to avoid the other days of the week. Our tongue, what we say, reflects who we are fundamentally.

Matthew 12:33-37 speaks to this concept either you have good fruit or bad fruit. Revelation says the same thing you are either hot or cold. Matthew continues and states that because from what is in your heart, there your mouth will speak. If you have good your mouth will produce good, if evil is in your heart, how you speak will betray that. I heard of the tragic death of Meredith Demko, and I know that we are still reeling from it. Many of our youth more than knew her, but actually spent significant time with her. Let me share with you something that is coming out of that terrible tragedy that can be considered a positive in the midst of more negative than we know how to deal with. Her parents are speaking out. They are not bitter and saying hateful things about the other driver, but directing their words so that DUI laws will be changed. They are grieving but we can read their hearts because their words belie a desire, a truly heartfelt desire to love people and to make this world a better place by what they learned, instead of just focusing on their own grief and their own loss, which would also be their right to do.

On Thursday evening when I came to church there was a group of 4 or 5 kids in the parking lot racing around on their bikes, they are local kids. I was so glad to see them there. It was the first time since I've been here that I've seen a group of local kids hanging around our church. I was thinking we should have a welcome station at the well where they could come and get something cold to drink and maybe a snack. Because I'm sure that they are probably expecting one of us to say: Hey, slow it down, or don't know you aren't allowed to ride your

bike in the parking lot, or, they expect us to talk among ourselves how much of a nuisance they are. All of these words will justifiably be interpreted as us telling them: “You are not welcome”.

If we try hard enough we can always find something negative to say about any individual, any group, any decision, any church, any country. But when we focus on the positive and the potential then the negative seems to disappear. Our faith will be reflected by what we say, how we say it and our motives behind why we say it.

If a person’s faith has no control over her tongue then her faith has failed at a most crucial point. Allow your faith to shape what you say. Because what you say will shape what we do. And what’s that lesson our mom used to teach us: if you don’t have anything nice to say... Amen.