

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2018

Text: James 3:1-12

Theme: "Tongue Taming"

Taming, what needs taming? We may try to tame what is unruly, unpredictable, or maybe dangerous. Maybe if you can just avoid, then no need for taming. James speaks of what has been tamed and what has not. He says every kind of beast and bird, reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed (vs 7). How is such taming done? It could be gently or not so gently, with concern or indifference, kindness or even cruelty. Think of the lion tamer acts. In years past He would crack the whip to direct the beasts. They would snarl and slap at the whip, but in the end they would do what the tamer wanted. It gave the impression at least of the conquering of the beast.

Domestic animals have been trained for a long time, normally in not so dramatic a way. Calves raised for show can be led by a rope. You can take one like this (though probably thicker), loop it over the ears and around the nose and the cow will follow. Now if one waits for the calf to be around 700 pounds before the rope is ever put on, it may well be more the cow doing the leading.

James uses the example of the horses. He observes how bridles are put on horse, bits in the mouth, to persuade the horse. Turn the head and the whole horse turns. Taming and training horses is something I know a lot about, actually Nancy and I both are pretty much experts. That's because we have watched 10 seasons of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation show called *Heartland*. Maybe some of you have seen it too. In the show the female protagonist, Amy, tames horses all the time. She puts the horse in a round paddock. Then she takes a rope like this, maybe thicker, and runs that horse around

that paddock, usually in a counter clockwise direction. After a while, I'm not sure just how long as we don't get to see all the laps, you stop, walk to the center and wait for the horse to come up behind you and stick his horse nose over your shoulder. When that happens, you have him. That's all there is to it. Some day when I retire now I can go directly into the horse gentling business.

All kinds of animals, "yes," says James, they can be tamed, but the tongue, now that's a different matter. "No human being can tame the tongue," he says (vs 8).

The tongue is an example of the micro managing, or manipulating the macro. Yes, he gives us the example of the bridled horse, turn the mouth and turn the horse. The mouth is not the big part of the horse. James also gives the example of ships. A ship, even a large one can be turned by a relatively small rudder. James puts before us this vision of the ship on the waves, a big one, and big waves and then the words, "they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs." (vs 4) You could translate it a little more imagination grabbing way than that: ο [pou h` ο`rmh. tou/euvqu, nontoj bou, letai—"Wherever the whim of the pilot wants." It's the small doing big things, maybe thinking, 'I'm big stuff.'

Such it is with the tongue. It is small in size, but in spouting out boasts (vs 5). The James compares it to fire. He paints the picture of a great blaze that started from a small fire. This is something many in the western part of the US can relate to this year. Yes, the great blaze started small but soon a great forest was ablaze. That's the tongue says James, a fire.

The tongue is mite sized dynamite. And it's just nasty. James pictures it as this one member set among the rest of the members and what does it do? It stains the whole body and sets the whole course of life ablaze. (vs 6) James has more bad things to say about the

tongue, not done yet. He says it is full of poison, death bearing poison. It's an unstable evil. It is twisted and forked. Look what it does. It is used to bless our Lord and Father and then it twists itself around to curse, curse those made in the likeness of God (vs 9). He says it ought not be (vs 10). And you would not think this to be. How can a spring spew forth both salt and fresh water (vs 11)?

How do you control it? And how did we get on this subject of tongue control? James has started out by talking about teachers, teachers in the church. He says many should not be teachers as they will be judged with greater strictness. With greater responsibility comes greater accountability. He goes on to say we all have reason to be judged as we stumble in many ways. He tells us if one does not stumble, he is a perfect man, though we could translate that 'complete man.' Such a man controlling the tongue can control his whole body. Is he saying this is what to look for in a teacher, one who has his tongue under control? Then he goes on to speak of how hard that is, even impossible. Will this not result in not many, even not any?

So how do you tame the tongue? Can you tie it down with severe consequences for speaking out of turn? Can it be controlled with a heavy loading of the first use of the law, that which threatens punishment? Yes, lack of control does come with consequences. We may say some of that is "naturally occurring." Bad mouth people and venomous words will find their way back to you, or you could be demoted or lose your job. You may find yourself lonely as you are not a lot of fun to be around and people avoid you.

We could try agreed upon consequences. You could have a bad mouthing jar. It is agreed when the tongue hurls out something nasty then a dollar or two goes into the jar. This may reduce outbreaks, a type of volunteer tongue bridling. You could try the muzzle. We could look upon this as a more severe kind of tongue tying. But here there is no real

concern for the one with the tongue, just the will of the one who doesn't want to hear. With the muzzle silence is enforced by a greater outside power. A dog doesn't beg to be muzzled, but it happens. Silence can be enforced by such muzzling in the work place, in the military, maybe at home on some level. It's the duct tape method, just put it on.

But does that really tame the tongue, no! Any gap, any opportunity and the spew and poison will just come on out. Even the most severe consequences won't tame it. James says the tongue sets the whole course of life on fire, then it in turn is set on fire in hell (unless there is a radical change). Yet it still spews.

Again, James says this ought not be. But it is. Really how can it be any different? No olives from fig trees and no figs from grapevines, so why would there be fresh water from a salt pond? Something radical has to happen. Something has.

There is a tongue tamer. He is the one who casts out the demon when His disciples were floundering. There is no limit to His power. He could have stopped all venomous words spoken against Himself or others. God could employ the giant roll of duct tape of His power and every mouth would be shut. There would not be a word of dissent or defense. We would be gagged by the full force of the law and we could never wiggle free.

But that is not how He came, not how He tamed. He has tamed the roaring lion. And it wasn't by running him around a paddock with a rope. His power is seen as He cast out the demon. Yes, it convulsed the boy and cried out, but in the end came out, no say in the matter. Jesus did come to release from the power of the devil. Casting out demons as a part and a sign of greater release.

Jesus is a teacher, not just a teacher, The Teacher. "We all stumble," says James, but no, not this One. This brother of James never stumbled, tongues taunted and tongues tempted to trip Him, but never once did His stumble. James says teachers will be judged

with greater strictness.” (vs 1) We could translate it, “will receive greater judgment (mei/zon kri,ma lhmyo,meqa). Yes, greater judgment He did receive, our judgment. He was judged for us, for all our stumbling in word, in deed and in thought. How great is His love. How great is His sacrifice. How great is the result.

The lion likes to spew out accusations, but all the accusations of the law, true, guilty as charged, have been taken by Jesus. The evil tongue of the evil one is tied. The Lamb has conquered the roaring lion and his now at the right hand of the Father, risen and reigning, and one day returning. He rules all for the eternal good of those who are called by His name.

No human being can tame the tongue, but there is the taming by the One from above who came to us below. We have been baptized into the reigning Lord. We are cleansed of our sin and clothed in His righteousness. We have a saving connection to the Divine. The Divine come into our world not in raw glory and holiness. That would have been our end. No, He come lowly and humbly, the same divine, but in a way we can hold onto. He is our life line to God. Through the working of the Spirit He pours out we have a new heart, a heart created in the likeness of God, one that delights in the will of the Lord.

In Jesus the impossible is possible, happens. He says in our lesson from Mark 10, “All things are possible for the one who believes.” (vs 23) The power is not in the one believing, or in the believing, but in the One believed on, the One whom believing tethers us to. Something miraculous happens to the tongue. “Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise.” It is the Lord opening. This is the only way. Teachers know this for those they teach and for themselves. Teachers teach this.

Can fresh come from salty? No, not normally, impossible. We read in 2 Kings 2:19-22: “¹⁹Now the men of the city said to Elisha, "Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant,

as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful." ²⁰ He said, "Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. ²¹ Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it." ²² So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke."

The heart is healed in Christ. The tongue is transformed. The old salt, the old corruption is always at hand ready to spew out its poison. My brothers, this ought not be. We confess. We are cleansed. Now with our transformed tongues we praise and bless. For Jesus sake. Amen