Taming the Tongue
James 3:1-12   Matthew 12:33-37

A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2015.

Let us pray, May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

A new monk joins the monastery, taking a vow of silence. After one year, he is called before the abbot and allowed to speak two words. The novitiate says, “Food bad.” Another year goes by and the monk, standing before the abbot, is allowed to speak two words. He says, “Bed hard.” At the end of three years, the monk is again allowed to speak two words. He says, “I quit.” The abbot responds, “I’m not surprised, you’ve done nothing but complain since you arrived!”

In 2005 I traveled to London, England, seeking credentials as a priest in the Church of England, Diocese of Europe, so that I could serve Christ Church in the heart of Naples, Italy. While in London, I stayed in an Anglican Monastery, rising early for communal prayers and taking most of my meals in mandatory silence. I found the forced silence unsettling and I longed to be free to speak at will.

Like most democracies, Americans treasure freedom of speech. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, adopted on December 15, 1791, along with the nine other amendments of the Bill of Rights, regards religion and expression:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

We treasure freedom of speech; however, we also acknowledge that there are limits and responsibilities in exercising this right.

In 1919, shortly after World War I, in the Supreme Court case of Schenck v. United States, it was decided that distributing flyers in opposition to the draft was not protected under the First Amendment. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., writing for a unanimous court, said, “The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic.” It was ruled that distributing anti-draft flyers violated the Espionage Act of 1917, which had been amended with the Sedition Act of 1918. Justice Holmes goes on to say, “The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive
evils that Congress has a right to prevent.” Limits to freedom of speech include slander, pornography, classified information, copyright violation, and public security, just to name a few.

In 1969, during the Viet Nam era, Schenck was overturned in Brandenburg v. Ohio. This ruling established a new litmus test for banned speech – requiring that there be the likelihood of imminent lawless action (such as a riot), rather than the broader clear and present danger established fifty years earlier.

We treasure freedom of speech; however, we also acknowledge that there are limits and responsibilities in exercising this right. As adults, we no longer believe that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. We have been struck by the blunt force of words spoken in anger. We have been gouged by the sharp stick of a careless word. Our psyche has been bruised by the rod of oppressive words that we hear repeatedly, leading to self-doubt and low self-esteem. Words have the power to hurt, just as much as sticks and stones. As adults we more fully understand the value of silence. If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all - for we are a people of unclean lips and we live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

James, the brother of our Lord, places restrictions and responsibilities on speech. In an admonition against angry speech in chapter one, verse nineteen, James instructs the faithful, saying, “…let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak…” In verse twenty-six, James goes on to say, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” In the final verses of chapter one, James provides two conditions for faithfulness - proper speech and care for the poor. As we learned last week, the second chapter of James addresses caring for the poor; however, examples of improper speech included words that honor the rich and shame the poor (2:3), empty words of greeting without assistance (2:16), and claiming a faith without works (2:18). Now, in chapter three, James returns to the evils associated with unrestrained speech.

I begin most sermons by quoting Psalm nineteen, verse fourteen. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Today that verse seems more poignant. I confess that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart are a mess. I’m a work in progress. I have not yet mastered the taming of my tongue; therefore, I have not reached Christian maturity. There are careless words that I wish I had never spoken and there are wounds that my words have inflicted. I bless my Lord and Father out of one side of my mouth and I curse those made in the image of God out of the other. I’m reminded of Martin Luther’s explanation of the commandment against false-witness.

We should fear and love God, so that we do not lie about, betray or slander our neighbor, but excuse him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything (Book of Concord, Small Catechism).
I have made many mistakes (3:2), but I long to pattern my speech after those who communicate wisely – those whose words build-up rather than tear-down. O that God would place within my heart an abundance of good treasure (Matt 12:35) so that I might speak wisely. O that the Holy Spirit would assist me in taming the inner turmoil James references in chapter one (1:14-16), bridling my tongue and applying a hard rudder to my speech. For what is a bit without the reigns? What is a rudder without the tiller? Left to myself, I stoke the fires of hell with my duplicitous speech, my toxic talk, threatening the very cycle of life (3:6).

My family tells me that I have become very quiet since returning from my year-long deployment to Afghanistan. My girls find my silence unsettling. My wife initially expressed concern for my well-being. I’m mindful that our words have the potential to create what Justice Holmes described as a clear and present danger. Therefore our speech must be restrained. Like the new monk in the monastery, our words can be filled with complaint, instead of putting the best construction on everything. We are to constantly fill our hearts with the treasure of God’s word and with the help of the Holy Spirit we are to tame our speech, just as we have tamed the creatures of God’s creation (3:7). The fruit of our heart is to produce speech that is like a freshwater spring. Together, may we continue to grow in Christian maturity. Amen.