



northminster presbyterian church

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SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12 Mark 8:27-38

SERMON: Talk Like A Pirate (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

This coming Tuesday, September 19, is National "Talk like a Pirate Day." Its founders relate it's origin in June 1995 this way: "We were playing racquetball, not well but gamely. On this day, for reasons we still don't quite understand, we started giving our encouragement in pirate slang. Reaching for a low shot that, and straining something best left unstrained, led to the first 'Arrr!' which started something. One thing led to another. 'That be a fine cannonade,' one said, to be followed by, 'Now watch as I fire a broadside straight into your yardarm!' and other such helpful phrases. By the time our hour on the court was over, we realized that lapsing into pirate lingo had made the game more fun and the time pass more quickly. We decided then and there that what was needed was a new national holiday, Talk Like a Pirate Day."

On the port and starboard of their website they ask and answer some basic questions: Q. The big one: Why? A. *Why not?* Talking like a pirate is fun. It's really that simple. It adds a zest, a swagger, to your every day conversation. Or if you need another reason? Go, have a beer, burp in public. Say "Aarr!!!" You know that would feel good! They point out that there can be a lot of fun. How about Talk Like A Pirate Day in church. For example, "The choir will now sing, "How Great Thou Aaarrrt!" They offer jokes that Bob Nelson or Thurmond Hood would be proud of: "What's the pirate movie rated? - Arrr!" "What kind o' socks does a pirate wear? - Arrrrgyle!" "What's the problem with the way a pirate speaks? - Arrrrtication!" They remind us that when they urge us to *talk* like a pirate, they don't mean we should *act* like pirates. The Pirate Guys are solidly against pillaging, plundering and slaughtering like pirates.

So what do you think? On Tuesday, Jane Russell is our office volunteer. Should we ask her to answer the phone with "*Ahoy, me hearty!*"? If the caller makes any protest, should we then have Jane call him a scurvy dog who will soon be walking the plank and ending up in (here he is again!) Davy Jones' locker. It could be lots of fun!

I am sure that today's Lectionary passage in James wasn't chosen to coincide with Talk Like a Pirate Day. But it is fitting to see how James sets his jib as he talks about taming the tongue. "Look at ships," he sounds like a salty sea dog; "though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits" Makes you want to say "aye, aye Skipper"

The tongue is a small but powerful instrument, able to have a huge effect just like the rudder on a pirate ship. Think of the power of words you have heard, or that you have spoken, over the course of your life. "You are too small to be a good basketball player". "Girls should steer clear of science and engineering." "You can't be a Christian and believe that!" "You are just a loser!" "You were born on the wrong side of the tracks." "You'll never amount to much!"

While we might enjoy having one day to Talk Like a Pirate, our challenge is to figure out what it means for us to Talk Like a Christian; *not just one day but every day, to every one, on every occasion - private and public*. You see we can't use our tongues to "bless the Lord and Father" one minute, and then "curse those who are made in the likeness of God" the next. It is not appropriate to offer up enthusiastic praise to God on Sunday, and then call your coworker a stinking bilge rat on Monday!

For one day it's pretty easy to talk like a pirate, since all you need to do is pepper your speech with the occasional "Ahoy!" "Avast!" and "Arrr!" Faithful Christian speech however requires more than the proper vocabulary. To talk as a Christian, we need to realize that all the other people with whom we speak are, like us, created in God's image. They are women and men into whom God breathed life, imbued with a holiness and a sacredness that comes straight from their Creator. To talk like a Christian is to talk in ways that reflect God's word: a *Word that has been from the beginning and always will be always creative, redemptive, nurturing, up building, gentle, loving, tender, warm, affirming.*

This section of the letter of James is a lengthy development of the admonition in 1:19, "*let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.*" Specifically, this discussion is directed especially to and at teachers, those whose ministry is exercised particularly through speaking to others. Now before you all sit back and watch me struggle with this text, you are all still as we might say, "on the hook" as well. What James holds out to all of us here is the ideal that our speech reflects our striving to become wholly what we are created to be. James uses vivid metaphors to describe the power of speech, he wants us to recognize that our speech, what we say, how we say it is crucial if we are to let our faith been seen in action; the focus we had last week.

In our day, speech proliferates in many forms, not only orally, but in written modes and by all manner of electronic communication. People can become careless in their speech. Likely many of us will be aware of situations where someone made unhelpful remarks in an ill-advised email sent "Reply To All". James' image of a forest fire is exactly on point in such a situation.

Like a doctor who examines a patient by asking them to stick out their tongue, so our speech reveals the true intent of the heart. What we say, how we say it and where we say it reveals much about how we are growing in response to God's grace. Scientists tell us that when we hear a word, the physical movement that enters our ear activates 24,000 tiny nerves which react through the limbic system and results in the pituitary gland sending hormones into the body. When we hear harsh or painful words, the resultant chemical reaction lasts 72 hours! If all someone ever hears is damaging speech, no wonder are perpetually agitated and upset! For people like me, it is a very risky thing to use words that have great power to shape reality! I am glad you hear my words and not those who preach hate or prejudice or superiority or arrogance. However much you sense my passion for some matter of public policy, you never will hear me as Pat Robertson does from time to time, call down God's wrath on some specific community because of how they acted or voted.

Let me remind you of four movies that encapsulate much that is redemptive about real Christian speech: A Christmas Story, 12 Angry Men, All the President's Men and Good Night, and Good Luck.

A Christmas Story is the classic comedy about little Ralphie's quest for a particular BB gun with which, he is warned over and over, he will "shoot his eye out." Remember the scene in when Ralphie's friend, Flick, responds to a triple-dog dare by licking a frozen lamp post, and how the fire department has to come to help get Flick's tongue free. I offer this today as a moment of levity because this is some hard stuff, and it gets real personal! But Flick stuck to that frozen lamppost reminds us that the misuse of the tongue can have disastrous results.

In the movie "Twelve Angry Men" we see both the positive and the negative power of the tongue. Juror Eight (Henry Fonda) is the only one of the twelve in the Jury room unwilling to slap an immediate label of "guilty" onto the low-income, non-White-looking, teenaged defendant. The odds are against Juror Eight. The other eleven jurors either have hastily concluded that the defendant is guilty or have simply settled on the verdict so that they can be done and move on to other things, such as attending a ball game, or getting out of the heat. By their speech, several jurors reveal their prejudices, and hurl insults and accusations at each other. Then there is Juror Eight, who uses his tongue as a tool of level-headed tenacity. Through his persuasive, reasonable speech, he is able to challenge the other jurors' beliefs about the defendant, until at the movie's end, the unanimous verdict is "not-guilty." Clearly, the film shows that the tongue can spark destruction, but it can also generate hope and salvation.

In "All the President's Men", we also see the positive and negative sides of not only speech, but words in general. President Nixon ordered illegal actions that led to his downfall, just as the oral words of Deep Throat and the written words of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward accomplish good by establishing the truth of what was going on in the corrupt administration. The movie shows words of tongue and typewriter both as a destroying fire, and a refining, purifying fire.

More recently a dazzling example of journalism, and the dual power of words was seen in "Good Night, and Good Luck." This movie was made in black and white to re-tell the clash between journalist Edward R. Murrow and Sen. Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy's words were a spiteful, hateful, raging fire, in contrast Murrow's words were reasoned and calm. Murrow speaks out against McCarthy, knowing that doing so will have implications for himself and his network, CBS. This movie reminds us that as Christians, there are times we must respond to the wicked tongue, not with silence, but a virtuous tongue.

I would commend to you these words from Colossians 4:6, "*When you speak, seek to choose words that build up the other person. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.*" In New Testament times, salt was the primary preservative, so we are directed to speak in ways that preserve the other person. To talk like a Christian means is to speak words that will help a person or a group experience grace and the fullness of their own identity and their belonging to the community. So think: What can you say to your child, your parents, your spouse, your partner, your neighbor and your colleague, to someone you meet in the grocery line or at the bar? What can you say that has a chance of helping that person experience a sense of love and God's affirmation? What can you say that will hold out to that person all the possibilities for growth and participation that come from knowing they belong to God? Sure this is not easy, but it is not impossible either. *And it is full of hope*; for the speaking of such a word can create a climate where the other person can respond.

Finally, when we talk like a Christian, our aim is to speak in a way that is in line with the teachings of Jesus. This is an enormous challenge for us, because Jesus takes speech seriously and he issues numerous warnings about the consequences of our language. For Jesus, words are never cheap; *and they always pack a punch*. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder.'" No surprise there. But then Jesus says, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Jesus warns us against using empty phrases in our prayers, Jesus tells us not to judge others, and wraps everything up in the command to "do to others as you would have them do to you". For Jesus, words are every bit as important as actions, because words have the power to build up or break down.

Talking is more than chit-chat according to Jesus. It's a matter of life and death, with words of love and forgiveness having a radically different impact than words of hate and condemnation. As *the Word of God in human flesh, Jesus takes all of this very personally*.

On Tuesday you can decide for yourself whether or not to observe, Talk Like a Pirate Day. It's all in good fun, it's a way to feel bold and daring and it really won't affect you - unless you slip up and call your boss a scurvy ol' sea dog!

But all of us who would seek to trust our lives to Jesus Christ, all of us who seek to be Christian people, we need to *Talk Like a Christian*. As we do, we'll be setting sail with Jesus on a most amazing adventure, on land and sea, as part of a very diverse and interesting crew, all different yet all persons made in God's likeness, all seeking to serve and follow our Captain, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh for our sake and for our salvation. And all God's people and all God's pirates said: *Arrrrrrmen!*

James 3:1-12

1Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7For every species of

beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Mark 8:27-38

27Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” 34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

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