

**A sermon based on James 3:1-12 and Mark 8:27-38. preached at Knox Church
Dunedin New Zealand by Jordan Redding on 12 September 2021**

I.

So we're told our tongue is like a rudder. Even though the rudder is small it has a remarkable ability to steer the whole boat. Even a little turn can send the boat hundreds of kilometers off course.

Our tongue has a similar power, James says, exercising influence far beyond its size. One conversation, one speech, one phrase, one word can have far reaching consequences, changing the course of relationships, communities, societies, even history.

What James wrote almost two thousand years ago is still demonstrably true today. Phrases like "They are us" or "Team of five million" are positive examples of the power of words: ordinary words and yet, in the right context at the right time, they had a profoundly unifying effect on our country.

But we also see the harm that words can cause. Words that spread misinformation or disinformation; words that give voice to radical ideologies, bigotry, discrimination and hate.

We are well aware of the potential for greater harm today through the amplifying effect of social media, where there are few filters for harmful words or ideas. Or rather, the filters, the algorithms that are there, actually spread virulent ideas faster, directing them down avenues where they can thrive.

James is right that our tongue (or maybe today, our fingertips typing) is like a small fire that can set ablaze a whole forest. Except today, the forests are drier, the temperatures are higher, and water for dousing the flames is harder to find. There's more at stake.

We are all too aware that words can have harmful consequences. So it's no surprise that many public debates recently have centred on the issue of freedom of expression and what limits should be placed on it.

The individual right to freedom of expression is vitally important for a liberal democracy, where ideas are robustly discussed and everyone, regardless of creed, culture, ethnicity, orientation, ability, or gender has an equal voice.

But we also know it's not that simple. That some voices are louder than others. That some cultures or perspectives are more dominant than others. That some languages are spoken over others. That the popular opinion isn't always the right opinion.

I wonder what James might say to the church today as we navigate these waters? The whole modern idea of human rights, while it has arisen out of a judeochristian worldview, would have been a foreign concept to the biblical authors. James' primary concern is not with our right to say whatever we want. His primary concern is with the consequences of our words. For those of us who "bless the God made known in Jesus", we have a responsibility to similarly use our words to bless our fellow human beings, each and every one "made in the likeness of God".

The individual right to free speech, in other words, is not an absolute right, defended at all costs and abstracted and removed from their real world consequences. The consequences matter. I'm reminded of a movie I watched recently called Collateral. Tom Cruise is playing a nihilistic hitman. At one point he shoots someone dead. Jamie Foxx accuses him of killing the man. And Tom Cruise responds: "No, I didn't kill him. I shot him. The bullets and the fall killed him."

True enough. And yet we might see why that reasoning is problematic. Just because I can say something doesn't mean I should. If I light a fire in the height of summer in a bone-dry forest, I shouldn't be surprised if I start an uncontrollable blaze, even if that was never my intention.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Jack, the minister at Knox Church in Ōtautahi Christchurch, said a few years ago that we do not speak into "some vague space of unanswerability". Rather, we speak "into a space of responsibility and consequence".

Matthew's comments, I think, resonate with what James is saying. We could say, our speech is for something. It is for relationship: for blessing God and for blessing each other who are made in the image of God. Psalm 19 even talks about the whole creation pouring out wordless praise to God. Speech is God's gift to enable relationship with God, with one another, with the earth around us.

And consequently we are called to go beyond simply asserting our right to freedom of expression. We are encouraged to take a step further and ask what the effect of our words might be. This is a far more complex discussion.

II.

And it's made more complex by the fact that, even with the best of intentions, we can still get it horribly wrong. James acknowledges as much when he says we all make mistakes. No one is perfect. In one breath we can praise God. And in the next breath we can curse one another.

Our reading concludes with a rather uneasy comparison: can a spring pour freshwater and saltwater at the same time? Well obviously no. In fact, the saltwater will make the freshwater salty. The implication is that all our relating to one another, even with the best of intentions, fails to live up to God's intentions for our life together.

The water has become brackish and salty. We are not able to love God and to love one another as God loves us. We fall short. We are inarticulate. Our words are inadequate. Perhaps precisely because our speech is a gift for relating to one another in love, it carries such raw capacity for distortion and harm. Through our words we love and yet we fail to love fully.

Take a look at Peter in our gospel reading. In one moment, he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Chosen One, the Saviour God. He gets it so right! And yet in the very next moment, he reveals his ignorance and his inability to understand what that means. He gets it so wrong and Jesus says, get behind me, Satan!

I've no doubt Peter had the best of intentions. He wanted to keep his friend, Jesus, safe from harm. And yet, he totally missed the mark.

Interestingly, this passage is the turning point of Mark's gospel, smack bang in the middle. From this point on, Jesus makes his way to the cross. It seems significant to me that this episode falls in the middle of the gospel. The dividing point. In the one event, we hear Peter's remarkable confession of the truth and his inability to confess the truth. He is at once so right and so wrong.

Peter, I think, is you and me. Like him we stand in the middle of the story on the way with Jesus. Like him, we are an impossible contradiction: at once pointing to the truth with our words and completely missing the mark. We confess. And yet utterly fail to confess. We believe. And yet are people of unbelief. We love. And we fail to love.

It's what we articulate every week in worship. We place ourselves with Peter on the way with Jesus with the cross in the distance. We offer our confession and we orient our words, our actions, our life together, towards Jesus, the Crucified Christ.

Worship, prayer, is about the reorientation of our speech. Setting the rudder straight. Not simply asserting our right to talk. But learning to talk rightly. There is a close connection between our speech towards God and our speech towards each other. In Jesus, we've seen the two can't be separated.

III.

A concluding thought: that in prayer and worship, we are not only learning to talk rightly. We are also learning to be silent. Sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all. The way of the cross is the way of the One who stands judged by the powers of the world; the way of the One who was silent before the High Priest; the way of One who knows it's better not to speak if communion and fellowship is not possible; the way of the One who does not defend himself, but goes willingly to the cross.

As important as it is to speak up for justice, for truth, for peace, I can't help but wonder if the Church could learn from the silence of Christ at times. When Peter would do better to watch and listen, rather than speak. When truth is better articulated by silent solidarity than aggressive rhetoric. It seems to me many of our recent discourses in the church and in the public square are not so much genuine conversations as shouting matches. We talk past each other and forget how to listen. James, I think, would encourage us to discern where and when to light our matches, so that we can sit around the campfire and talk rather than be engulfed by an uncontrollable blaze. When the landscape is a bone dry tinderbox, we might do well to put the matches away. Amen.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Jordan Redding: jordan.redding@otago.ac.nz