

Psalm 34    Proverbs 15:1-10, 26    James 3

We celebrate the 250th birthday of our nation under God this weekend. We celebrate by giving God thanks for the freedoms he designed us to enjoy, for the freedoms our God-fearing forefathers and mothers won to protect. We enjoy more freedoms than any other people on the planet.

We are also entering early Trinity season, that dappled green span of time that the Church has long dedicated to our rest and to the growth of our spiritual lives, in particular. Given the words of the Psalmist, the wisdom of Proverbs, and the warnings of James this morning, it seems timely to focus not so much on freedom of speech, as on speech itself..specifically about its nefarious little accomplice..the human tongue.

We heard first from the Psalmist, “what man is he that desireth life, and liveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile.” We desire life, not here in the sense of physical existence, but rather life understood as a great and noble calling.. to live out the words of Jesus. The Psalmist’s words echo throughout with the associations of good and evil..and the tongue with the heart. People in the cradle of civilization realized that the tongue does the heart’s bidding; even without an anatomical connection, heart and tongue are intimately connected on the spiritual plane. And we are convinced as St. Paul was, that the tongue and heart connection is a communication channel for the Spirit.

Why did the ancient Hebrews and early Christians dwell so on the tongue in their ethics? ...Because they saw this: that death and life are in the power of the tongue... We see, hear, and sense all around us the ills that can be traced back to the tongue. I will not recite the news, which is only the tongue in print... So how is our civilization at large and our nation at home managing the power of the tongue? Truth is a victim, surely, for these days everyone is encouraged instead to voice his or her own truth.

One has only to hear James tell of a horse's obedience to a tiny bit in its mouth, even of a great ship obedient to its small rudder..but a tongue? He says, “even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth. And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.”

While we learn to be wary of our tongue, the tongue can do good things depending on the disposition of one's heart: best of all it can praise and bless God; it can proclaim freedom; it can soothe a troubled child with a whisper; it can give flight to arias from notes on a printed page; it can soften a stony heart with a plea. Not only can it, but the tongue never fails to reveal our inward character by the words that roll off it, by its tone, by its speed and cadence, and volume and so on; what it does to the lips..to the eyes where one's soul shines.

Like the Psalms, Proverbs belongs to what is called the wisdom literature in the scriptures. And Proverbs, today at least, speaks positively of the tongue as well. Proverbs says, “a soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.” And our reading from Proverbs leaves us with this image: “ a wholesome tongue is a tree of life; but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit”.

“Wholesome “ because such a tongue speaks the truth, and even more so if it can speak the truth in love. People cling onto words that speak the truth in love as they might cling to the tree of life. A wholesome tongue also refers to a tongue that helps and heals, being true to the image and work of its Creator and Saviour. For instance, even in a heated argument, it does what it can to help the other person become “whole”, just as God intends when our tongue speaks “Peace”..Peace can be heard coming when it becomes noticed by the other in our tone or words that we are searching for common ground. So Peace and wholeness in both souls concerned can issue from the tongue.

Well, what does our Lord say about the tongue and human speech? The clearest passage comes out of the gospel of Mark (7:15): “There is nothing without a man that entering into him can defile him, but the things which come out of him, those are they that can defile a man”..or divide a community, start a war. Indeed, the most efficient lethal weapon on the planet seems to me to be the tongue. It can kill souls as well as lift souls. An abused child will tell you so even if it is only by the course his life seems to take.

Now when we heard the Collect for this Fifth Sunday of Trinity season, we prayed this, “that the church may serve thee in all godly quietness”..an atmosphere conducive to spiritual growth.” I ask you this: what kind of tongue lends itself to “godly quietness”? A silent tongue..a tongue in prayer..not in idle conversation all day, not in shouting evil at the politicians on the screen, however evil the Lord alone might determine them to be in time, not whispering gossip, not teaching falsehoods, which is what James was so upset about.

Our uncivil nation, our din of a world ..need to hear the silence of our prayers..the silence is to communicate to others that in our prayer our tongues are not wagging and warlike, but flat on the floor of our mouths...as silent as any moment wherein peace is made. We are silent praying for our world and nation because we are praying for all parties deaf to one another from the loudness of conflict.

Beloved, we are incapable of warring with anyone when we pray in God’s spirit. We recognize as Americans and world citizens that already we are at our limits of hearing the speech that tears down. Praying such wise, we are not adding to the noise of divisions. We are listening for God in the silence to unite us and -even more critical for our spiritual growth,-to know that in the end, only God matters.