

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 2, 2018

“The Ear, the Tongue, and the Temper.”

Four women were playing bridge together in the recreation room of a certain retirement center out in California. As they were playing—but chatting, more than they were paying attention to their game they noticed an elderly gentleman wander into the room. They had never seen him before. He was obviously a newcomer to the retirement center.

Quickly, the four ladies perked up. One of them said, “Well, hello there. You’re new here, aren’t you?” The old man smiled and said that he was. “Just moved in this morning.” A second lady spoke up. “Well, where did you come from? Where did you live before?” And the old man said, “San Quentin. I was just released from there. I’ve been there for 30 years.”

“Is that right,” said the third lady. “What were you in there for?” Without even hesitating a moment, the old man said, “I murdered my wife.”

The fourth lady sat up in her chair. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled real big. “Oh,” she said, “then that means you’re single.”

It’s true isn’t it? More often than not, we hear what we want to hear.

Today’s scripture is from the book of James. James identifies himself only as a “servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In the early church it was thought by some to have been written by the Lord’s brother.

The entire book of James is a practical application of the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (James 1:22-24).

James was a pragmatic kind of person. He saw clearly that the majority of people are not moved by theoretical persuasion, but are looking for practical answers, for purpose and meaning, and for direction in the midst of problems and challenges.

Before he has even finished his first few verses of the first chapter he advises his readers: now be sure and know this, my brothers, be a good listener, don’t speak without caution, and be very careful about that temper which resides in each one of you.

This is the kind of advice you can carry with you as you go about your day’s work. It reminds me of a list of “nevers” that I have given to some couples, to help them avoid trouble. The first three on the list are:

Never both get angry at the same time.

Never talk at one another, either alone or in company.

Never speak loudly to one another, unless the house is on fire.

Another good rule that flies in the face of the three above is “never use never or always when you are arguing.” As in: “You never help me around the house” or “You always complain about my job.” The use of these two words only heightens the emotional level of the disagreement.

It has been noted that three out of every four people who have lost their jobs were dismissed because of an inability to handle personal relationships. How many of us would be greater successes at work and at home and with our children if we would be better listeners, if we gossiped less or spoke with greater care, and controlled our tempers? It wasn’t because they weren’t smart enough, or they could not do the job, or because they loafed. It was because they could not get along with other people.

“Be slow to speak,” James advises. That means become a better listener. The human ear holds a harp of 10,000 strings. Surrounded by fluid, tiny hair-like strings sort various sounds and send them on to the hearing center in the brain. This marvelous mechanism, like that of sight, is a masterpiece of our Creator.

Are our ears more attuned to gossip than to the gospel? Which do we listen to more closely? We are called to listen sympathetically to others. We are called to examine our sense of hearing.

Be slow to speak. The power of speech differentiates us from the lower animals. Yet the misuse of it can degrade us lower than animals. Our speech is one of the most revealing aspects of our personality. What we talk about most easily is what we think about most deeply in our hearts.

The Psalmist has written, “Praise the Lord, O my soul and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2) and “Upon his word I will meditate night and day” (Psalm 77:12). We are asked to examine our speech, for it reveals the innermost thoughts of our hearts.

It is when we start giving thanks for all the good things in our lives, when we start listing all the blessings that are part of our lives that we will be uplifted and renewed.

Examine your speech, James says. Be slow to speak. There is nothing so uplifting, enriching, and inspiring our friends as the power of speech. Examine your speech. How often do we have the gentlest, the kindest words for strangers, and yet save the harshest, most cruel words for those of our own family? "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26).

Think twice before you speak, and then stop to reconsider. This high dignity that we are given as Christians, the greatest of the gifts that come from above, the gift of speech, carries with it obligations. Christians must live up to their heavenly origin. The first test comes in speech.

The writer of Proverbs says: "He who guards his mouth preserves his life. He who opens wide his lips, comes to ruin" (Proverbs 13:3).

Finally, be slow to anger. An old rabbi is credited with the saying: "Two ears were given us, but only one tongue. The ears are open and exposed, but the tongue is walled in behind the teeth." And for good reason! Anger is not strength in personality when it is an uncontrolled force. It is an expression of human frailty and weakness. I know Jesus got angry and spoke truth to the Pharisees and money changers. But it wasn't anger that defined Jesus, it was his love and gentleness.

What makes us angry? The answers to that question will reveal our character. As the proverb says, "You can tell the size of the man by the size of the thing that makes him mad." Certainly, to boil up inside, to lose control because of some trivial personal hurt, to allow the forces of our being to run loose because our wills have been crossed or our self-esteem has been wounded, is not a mark of power. That. Literally, is power converted into poison. Uncontrolled anger is dangerous to our health.

Be slow to anger. It's all over in a minute, we say. So is a cyclone. But the wreckage has to be cleaned up.

All through the Bible we are warned about the sinful misuse of anger. In Christ we have the example of poise and emotional control. So, once again, James shares with us this earthly bit of practical wisdom. Be slow to anger. "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32).

The ear, the tongue, the temper—even these for the Christian are subject to the rule of Christ in our lives. Amen.