

“Tongue Tied”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

I have mentioned before that when I was about 12 years old, I became a little tongue-tied. As a younger child, I was a chatterbox; with a carefree way, I shared whatever came to my mind to any audience around me. But when I hit adolescence, it felt like lead coated my tongue. I observed other people’s conversations eagerly, wanting to jump in. But when I tried, I would trip over my words, awkwardly emitting a few strange sounds and then giving up on trying to say what I wanted to say because I was flustered.

A lot was new at that age for me; I had moved between divorced parents’ homes, and I was in a new school system, so what I had learned about the social structures of my elementary school flew out the window in this new environment. With people who seemed interesting to me, I would practice my conversations in my mind in advance; in my imagination, I was clever and cool. But the reality of my speech? More like klutz.

What finally helped me was joining the school chorus and joining a smaller group of singers who tried out for different music competitions. Learning about the breath control, enunciation, and phrasing required in choral singing helped me in general with speech. But every now and again, I find that old lead tongue creeps up on me— either when I am nervous, or when my mind is working faster than my mouth.

And I still have so much compassion for people who learn to speak a language new to them. For that reason, when we have a bible study or committee meeting, and I find the conversation moving too fast and jumping from one topic to another, I try to pause and ask any newer English speaker in the gathering if they have something they would like to add. Often, this slowing down to listen offers a chance to hear something very thoughtful and helpful to the group

conversation from a valued voice that may otherwise get overlooked. We should all be in the practice of doing this in a community rich with immigrant voices.

The letter from James encourages Jesus' followers to be very careful about the tongue. It is a small organ, but its impact has tremendous power. The tongue holds the ability for restless evil and deadly poison. But it also has the power to utter words that give blessing to another and to God. How will we use our tongues?

We saw last week how an offhand and unsubstantiated comment on social media about immigrants in a small Ohio city turned a nationwide spotlight on Haitian migrants just trying to work hard and build a new life for themselves. The comment, which I will not even repeat, has resulted in snowballing hatred against this immigrant group and even bomb threats against the town's local school. Yes, the tongue has tremendous power to curse.

But the tongue can bless, too.

With the recent passing of the actor James Earl Jones last week at age 93, I have been thinking about the power of speech. He certainly had a blessed tongue. If you think you do not know this actor about whom I speak, let me tell you that you probably do. He was the voice for Darth Vader in Star Wars. He was the voice of Mufasa, father of Simba, in The Lion King. For many years his voice introduced the news: "This... is CNN." He acted in plays on and off Broadway, from Shakespeare to August Wilson, and in the 1970's series Roots, and so much more. He was the voice of choice for any role that required gravitas: he was dignified; he was serious; to me, he sounded like the epitome of the wise grandfather. What I did not realize until I read his obituary was that he had a speech impediment.

According to the New York Times, James Earl Jones endured some family traumas at a young age. He was mute, and then stuttered. Later on, as he acted, those listening to him carefully "discerned occasional subtle hesitations in his delivery of lines. The pauses were deliberate, he said, a technique of self-restraint learned by stutterers to control involuntary repetitions. Far from detracting from his lucidity, the pauses usually added force to an emotional moment." "Because of my muteness," he said "I approached language in a

different way from most actors. I came at language standing on my head, turning words inside out in search of meaning, making a mess of it sometimes, but seeing truth from a very different viewpoint.”¹

James’ letter suggests we should harness our tongue, so that the speech that pours forth from it will be used for the power of goodness and blessing, rather than malice and curse. A careful tongue has tremendous power.

The practice of coming to church trains the tongue for talking to God and about God. Our children in Sunday School and in experiences of worship learn things like how to say the Lord’s Prayer, the Twenty Third Psalm, and learn to know the biblical characters and their stories by name. Not only does this practice provide a foundation for spiritual life; it also prepares you for the ways biblical references show up in literature, art, film, music, and so much more.

Joe, who teaches our older youth Sunday School class, tells me that he and Tara try to challenge the youth to not only speak about who and what the characters are, but also answer the question of why: Why did the biblical editors choose to include a particular story? Why would we even want to follow Jesus? Come to church enough, and you’ll probably have something to say and will be less likely to find yourself with your tongue tied.

When Jesus asked a difficult question, he first asked in a way that invited the tongue to speak. Jesus was a genius in how to start a conversation in a non-threatening way: “Who do other people say that I am?” I have learned from his tactic as well as from years in youth ministry that it is easier to start an important conversation by asking the indirect question of “What do others think or say about such-and-such” rather than the more piercing question, “What do you think about underage drinking?”

The disciples willingly answered Jesus: “Some say John the Baptist, and others, Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.” Okay, easy enough. Jesus reminds people of others who prepared the way for God’s big thing. Now, the more piercing question:

¹ Robert D. McFaddon, “James Earl Jones, Whose Powerful Acting Resonated Onstage and Onscreen, Dies at 93” in The New York Times. Sept. 9, 2024

“But who do *you* say that I am?”

You could forgive Peter if he had been tongue-tied in his answer. Ask many of us in the church, even those who have been coming for their whole lives, and they might be tongue-tied, because Jesus can be many things. Jesus can mean many things. Jesus meets us each in different ways. But as for Peter, without hesitation, he answers, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!”

Peter spoke boldly. He was calling Jesus the anointed one, the king— in a region of villages called Caesarea Philippi— an area named for the Roman emperor himself! Further, Peter named Jesus as the God anointed king upon whom Jews had been waiting for many generations. If Jesus is indeed the Messiah, he’d better have the power to back it up. That’s not something to say lightly.

At this point, Jesus sternly ordered Peter and the disciples to hold their tongues; “Do not say another word!” he warned them. I’m not sure if Jesus was not ready to come out of the closet that he is God’s son, or if Jesus knew that Peter saying such a thing publicly could get Peter killed, since Rome would have considered such a comment to be treasonous to the Emperor, who was believed to be the son of God. So, for many reasons, it would be wise to harness the tongue.

Still, Jesus chose at that point to unburden himself of things he knew, what would happen in Jesus’ tremendous calling, trusting the disciples to help carry them with Jesus:

Jesus told them that he would have to undergo great suffering.

He told them that he would be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes.

He told them that he would be killed, and that three days later he would rise again.

Then, Peter, who moments before uttered the true and right answer about who Jesus is, revealed that he had more growing to do before he could understand what these words truly mean. Because Peter started rebuking the one he had just named Messiah.

Jesus' response, "Get behind me, Satan!" came swiftly. That flash of anger– and I think that's what it was, rather than a gentle, teasing "Get behind me Satan" shows that Jesus knew his path was already difficult, and what he needed from his friend was someone to help him hold the burden of the cross on the path he would walk, rather than to redirect him to a different path.

This would not be the first time that Peter stumbles over his speech– not because he doesn't know the right things to say, but because he has a hard time standing by what he says. Church is a place that not only hears you into speech, serving you with words from our faith that are sweeter than honey; but also, church is a place that helps to show you how to live lives authentic to the faith we proclaim. For some, you may even learn how to live the faith, before you find the right words to describe it. We have some in our church who have not joined as members, because they stumble over whether to make faith statements on matters about which they are not yet sure. However, their actions are among the most faithful to Christ's teachings in our congregation.

If you find yourself a bit tongue-tied about how you will talk about God, about Jesus, about the bible or the church or our faith, you are not alone. Together, we will try– *imperfectly*– to find the words to describe that which is beyond description. But even with our tongues tied, we can learn together how to live lives worthy of bearing the name Christian on them; lives that bless God and bless one another.

Even with our clumsy tongues trying to make sense of this faith we live, God's tongue knows and speaks our names, and calls us into a deeper experience of this life and this faith we practice together.