

February 5, 2017

“Guarding Your Gates”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

James 3:3-10

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Well, I think it's obvious from today's scripture that you probably already know what I'll be talking about. What we say, and how we say it, with this (tongue). So let's watch a video...

<http://www.sermonspice.com/product/29499/The%20Power%20of%20the%20Tongue>

You know, two weekends ago at our homecoming retreat, Ted Burt led a seminar and used the term, "guard your gates." How important it is to guard your gates. Think about it. You have an eye gate. You have an ear gate. You have a mouth gate. And, really, I think we all know what he means... that we have to be careful and discerning about what we look at, the people we listen to, and especially about the things we say. The Bible tells us, "your eyes are too pure to look on evil things" and "the ear of the wise only seeks knowledge." That's the Biblical version of "guard your gates." And the Bible also tells us that our mouth gate is even more important because "life and death are in the power of the tongue." Life and death. Because just consider – have you ever been called a fool, stupid, ugly, a fat slob, or told you'll never amount to anything? Those words bring death. Those words kill dreams, kill self-esteem, kill confidence, kill love. On the other hand, have you ever been told, I love you, you can do it, I have faith in you. Those words bring life. They instill confidence, trust and love. See what I mean. When God formed us, he intended our mouths and tongues to be used to bless people and not to curse them. To build them up and not tear them down.

Now, I think.... (cell phone goes off... stop speaking and wait for someone to answer... until I realize it's my cell phone.) Oh, sorry about that. I guess that's a reminder to shut off, our phones. But come to think about it, let's talk about this little device for a moment. I'm reminded of the words from the apostle James we heard today, talking about how small things can make a big impact. Like a small bridle making a thousand pound horse obey. Or, a small rudder that steers a huge ship. And likewise, through these small devices, our small tongues have enormous power to wreck havoc. Obviously, they provide us with a lot of convenience and security, but they've also taken over our lives in so many negative ways. For one thing, statistics tell us that over one third of all automobile accidents are caused by drivers talking or texting on their cell phones. There's an example of how our talking can cause injury or even death. But there's even something worse.

Because, these days, just consider all the vicious and vile things said through e-mailing, texting and tweeting. If you read the Church Mouse column this month, he jokingly stated that we are to "tweet others as you would want to be tweeted." But the mouse has a point. Think how easily and nonchalantly people type out insensitive and hurtful words on their cell phones. And as a result, feelings are hurt, tempers flare, and irreparable harm done. And, oh, how our children have learned. Look at how teens use their phone as a means of bullying. Texting has turned into "sexting." And now it has even become a way for people to vent their perversions and frustrations and depressions. In just the past month, we've seen young people use their phones to live stream the torture of a handicapped person while spewing out all kinds of hateful things, the rape of a woman by three men while they taunted her, and most horrible of all, two young teenage girls that live streamed their own suicides as they were hanging themselves. I wonder how many of the gates of these young people, both the perpetrators and the victims, went unguarded throughout their lives.

And then, of course, there are just the regular words we use on a day to day basis, with our families, our colleagues, our friends, that cause tension, or hurt or division. Not to mention the words being thrown around in the news, which I covered last week. And I think we would all agree that our lives and our world would be so much better if we all took a little more care about the words we use.

Now why is it we sometimes have trouble controlling what comes out of our mouth? Consider – have you ever heard, or used, the phrase, "I'm just speaking what's on my mind." Well, it's been said, "Great minds talk about ideas, good minds talk about things, but weak minds talk about people." In that vein, there's the story about the famous 19th century preacher Henry Ward Beecher. One Sunday morning he ascended the pulpit of Boston's Plymouth Congregational Church, and found a note waiting for him. Beecher glanced at the note, and then announced, "I received this note from one of you this morning. It states quite simply, 'Fool'. Fool! Beecher paused, looked around, and said, "I often receive notes from people who forget to sign their names...but this is the first time someone has signed their name and forgotten to write the note." Yes, a great mind, especially one grounded in Christ, is no match for weak mind. Yet, unfortunately, it appears too many people are weak-minded. Weak minded, not because they lack common sense or intelligence but because they have allowed the culture to conform them to its way of acting and thinking. You see, when we don't "guard our gates," from the world around us, we become weak by compromising with the culture. A bit of accommodation there. Soften the firm. Cloud the clear. Nuance the straightforward. And little by little, our attitudes, values, habits,

ideas, and especially words, take on those ways of the world. It affects our minds, and more importantly, our hearts.

That's why Jesus said, "The things that come out of the mouth, come from the heart. The good person brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. Out of the heart, the mouth speaks." You know, I think a good part of the problem is that often times our heart is filled solely with self. Self-pride, self-importance, self-righteousness, and even self doubt. It's all about us – our wants and needs. What will make us happy and feel good about ourselves. With no regard for the feelings of others. And when the heart is centered on self, then when someone doesn't agree with us, we tell it like it is because our opinions are more important than theirs. When someone doesn't do something the way we want, we lash out because, of course, our way is the best and only way. When someone lives and acts in a way we don't agree with, we gossip, because that person is wrong, and worthy of our judgment. So often, it's those times when our hearts are centered only on self, that insensitive, hurtful words come out of our mouth. That's why it's so important to THINK before we speak. T-H-I-N-K. Are the words you speak really True. Are the words Helpful. Are the words Inspiring. Are the words Necessary. Are the words Kind. THINK! True, helpful, inspiring, necessary, kind.

And so if we want to change our words and way of speaking, we must "guard our gates" from the outside influences of the culture. St. Paul wrote, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." And we can do this when we look at others as people just like we are, God's children, trying to make the best of life on this earth. When we begin to see others, including our spouse, our neighbors, our coworkers, and, yes, even the people sitting beside you today, as people who have concerns, fears, struggles and issues, just like we do, then we'll find that we can be a little more kind, a little more patient, a little more understanding, a little more tolerant. We can see them as people who need our words of love and encouragement and compassion, not our words of anger or criticism or ridicule or derision.

And so, as we come to the communion table today in repentance over the things we may have said, let us have this prayer on our tongues, "Lord, keep your arm around my shoulder...but your hand over my mouth." Amen.