



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Taming the Tongue

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For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so (James 3:7-10).

Last week I participated in two gatherings of religious leaders having to do with the way people treat and talk about one another.

On Monday, the Rev. Liddy Barlow of Christian Associates and Rabbi Ron Symons convened several dozen individuals, mostly clergy, at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. We reflected on Christian, Jewish, and Muslim texts that call for people to respect each other, and signed a statement against various forms of bigotry and hatred. Then on Wednesday, I joined about twenty ministers, priests, and rabbis in a meeting we hosted here at Westminster, at the request of Congressman Tim Murphy, who said he wanted to discuss ways to overcome the incivility that's tearing at the fabric of our society.

Two things struck me about these gatherings. First, while it's good to have religious folk come together around a common cause, it's a sad commentary on our country that we still need to say that hatred and bigotry are bad, and we're against those things, and God is against them too. You might think these truths would have become self-evident by now, in the 21st century. The other thing that struck me is that signing statements in favor of basic moral commandments is not nearly enough. We need to change

the way we think and speak and act toward other people, and that change needs to begin right now.

Of course, almost everyone claims to be against hatred and bigotry, including those who are most hateful and bigoted. Everybody knows the correct answer on the test – “Is it better to love people or hate people?” – and that’s why simply repeating platitudes is not good enough.

Preachers are tempted to confine themselves to moral generalities precisely because they’re so innocuous. Nobody ever leaves a church or synagogue, or withholds contributions, or sends nasty notes because the minister, priest, or rabbi says we should all be nice. Platitudes are safe, which is why we hear so many of them. But they’re obviously not enough, or our society would not be so uncivil and the governments we elect would not be so stuck in gridlock. We need to get a lot more specific about concrete behaviors if we’re ever going to drain the poison and heal the wounds that weaken our society. So let me be a little more specific this morning about some things we all need to do differently.

First, anytime somebody says “I’m not prejudiced, but ...,” you know that whatever comes after the “but” will almost certainly contradict what came before it. If we’re really not about to say something prejudiced, we don’t need the disclaimer, do we? So for starters, let’s quit trying to spin the bad things we say, and just stop saying them altogether.

Now Jesus says that what comes out of the mouth comes ultimately from the heart, so the next thing we need to do is clean up our hearts. It’s good to have a filter that catches bad things before we say them, but it’s better still

not to need the filter because we're not actually thinking such malicious thoughts.

Cleaning up the garbage in our hearts is a big project, and it requires, among other things, that we stop adding to the mess. That means we need to stop indulging voices that conjure up hatred and fear and hostility by stereotyping and demonizing whole groups of people with simplistic labels and sweeping generalizations.

I browsed a website with millions of viewers some time ago, and one of the first headlines I saw said "Liberals hate Christianity." Really? I thought. Who exactly are the "liberals" they're talking about? Anybody who voted for a different candidate from the one they support, or has a more expansive view of what we owe each other in society? Some people hold those views precisely because of their Christianity. Then again, the other day I tuned in to a television network with even more millions of viewers, and within a few minutes I heard a commentator say, "The Left has no moral compass." He went on to talk about the "perfidy" of the Left, which of course means treachery or disloyalty. Really? They're traitors? Tens of millions of people have no moral compass, just because their ideas about what makes for a good society are different?

On the opposite side we're hearing a lot about "Antifa" lately, a movement where some of the members apparently think everyone to the right of themselves is a fascist, and sometimes they shout other people down in pretty much the way European fascists did almost a century ago. We all know how that turned out.

It's become a cliché to say that too many people live in echo chambers, where all the news and opinions they

hear just reinforce their own views and those of their like-minded friends, so they rarely encounter thoughtful opinions from another perspective. It's a cliché, but there's a good deal of truth in it, and it's true even of some people who turn up in church. There are churches, no doubt, where almost everyone has the same opinion about most things, but Westminster is not one of them. Churches can be places where we overcome incivility and really listen to one another, but only if the deepest values we learn from Jesus counteract and qualify some of what we hear from other sources.

Another thing we need to do is avoid the morally bankrupt move that goes like this: Somebody says, "Those people are terrible because they do X," where X is lying, or cheating, or stealing, or being unfaithful, or any other bad behavior, and "those people" means some tribe other than their own. Then, when it turns out that people from their tribe do the very same things, somehow they get a pass, and the same person says, "Well, you know, everybody does it. Nobody's perfect. Who are we to judge?"

What kind of moral logic is that? Your tribe is bad because some of your people do X, but when my people do X, that doesn't mean my tribe is bad? Didn't our mothers all teach us that two wrongs don't make a right? When our tribe is excused for doing the very things we condemn in somebody else's, it starts to look as though tribalism matters more to us than morality itself.

Here again, the church can offer an antidote to hypocrisy. Our faith reminds us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and we know that means us too. We hold up the highest standards of the Golden Rule and the Great Commandment to love our neighbors as

ourselves, but our faith and our own experience say that none of us are very good at living up to those standards. In church, we confess our *own* sins, not somebody else's, and that should take the air out of any inflated sense of self-righteousness. The grace of God creates a space where humility about our own shortcomings can lead to compassion for other people's faults, and drive out the hypocrisy that arises whenever tribal loyalty matters more than our loyalty to the word of God.

And then, of course, there's the Internet and social media. It's been said that the Internet emboldens people, but often just the opposite is true. The web and social media can give free rein to a kind of cowardice, where people put out all sorts of false or inflammatory or hurtful words they would never say to another person's face, but distance and anonymity undermine their sense of accountability.

All of this is about taming the tongue, and taming the heart that informs the tongue. It means speaking no evil, but it also means speaking a good word when silence is not enough. It's a hard thing to do, but if some of our friends or family say things that are hurtful or unfairly stereotype whole groups of people, we may need to step in and offer some conversational first aid. Each of us has to decide what works best in our own circles, but the point is that sometimes we need to speak up, if keeping quiet could be interpreted as acquiescing in some form of verbal abuse.

The Bible says, if you sow the wind, you'll reap the whirlwind, and that's what's happening all around us, isn't it? People who analyze systems say that the attitudes and behaviors characteristic of any organization tend to reflect what that system is structured to produce. People in twelve-step programs define insanity as doing the same thing over

and over again and expecting a different result. If we spend all our time in echo chambers, and feed our hearts with stereotypes and prejudices wrapped in hostility by people who stoke our baser impulses, is it really any wonder that our society has become so uncivil? If we want things to be different, we need to change some of our social structures, to be sure, but we also need to change our own attitudes and behaviors.

A few years ago I ran across some comments from young children about what love means, and one of those lines has stuck with me ever since. It's attributed to a four-year-old named Billy, who said, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth."

"Safe in their mouth." That's what people's names should be in Christian community. Our mouths should be a kind of sanctuary, a safe place, for other people. And our mouths will only be safe when our hearts are safe, too, because we practice loving and treating other people the way we ourselves want to be loved and treated.

What we say or fail to say may be among the most influential things we ever do. Words matter. And Jesus says, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." We need to tame our tongues, and the hearts that shape the things we say. We need to do that because God will hold us accountable one day, and because it's just the right thing to do.



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