

James 3:1-9 (NRSV)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful, frightening text James gives us for Rally Day, the first day of the new Sunday school year. As if it weren't enough to face a group of high school students with the collective attention span of a gnat. As if it weren't enough to face first and second graders who look up at you with those great innocent eyes the size of dinner plates and ask you why the wedding guest who didn't dress well enough for a banquet he didn't even expect to be invited to got thrown into the outer darkness and what does that mean? As if it weren't enough to face a bunch of adults who all know much more about the Bible than you do, and now you have to explain to them what an ephod is. What *is* an ephod, anyway?

As if all of those weren't enough. Now James tells you, "Not many of you should become teachers" – stop, I knew that already – "you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Judged? *Greater* strictness. Oh, my. And this is the point where you start to wonder whether counting the offering or serving on the Audit Committee might be an easier way to fulfill your Christian obligation.

You see, teachers have to talk. *Have* to. It's a job requirement. And speech is risky. The tongue, James tells us, is small but mighty. As the rudder is small compared to the ship, so the tongue is small. As the spark is small compared with the forest fire, so the tongue is small. Small but mighty. The tongue stains the whole body, sets afire the cycle of nature. Every wild animal, every beast and bird, reptile and sea creature has been tamed, everything except the tongue.

And we know it is true. When we speak, we open ourselves to all sorts of dangers, all sorts of evil, all sorts of error and mistake and sin. What is the quote attributed to Lincoln? "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt." But, if teaching is to be done, someone has to do it and unless we are perfect, we will make mistakes. And some will be simple mistakes, easily corrected, and others will not.

In today's Gospel lesson, Peter is a wise teacher and a terrible fool in the space of a couple of sentences. Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you think I am?" and Peter, alone among the disciples, gets it right – "You are the messiah." In Matthew's Gospel Jesus says that Peter will be the rock upon which Jesus will build the church. Peter gets it right. But when Jesus tells the disciples what it means to be the messiah, that the messiah must undergo rejection and suffering and death, Peter puts his foot in it. He pulls Jesus aside and tries to describe a model of discipleship that is a little easier for followers to accept, one that doesn't involve all that unpleasant talk about suffering and death. Jesus will have none of it – "Get behind me,

Satan,” he tells Peter, and Peter, as usual, looks and probably feels like an absolute dope.

And right about then, Peter might be thinking along James’ lines – “Not many of you should become teachers.” He’s probably wondering whether he can get out of talking altogether. But, whether we like it or not, we are always teachers. We have children, our own or others’ who are watching us all the time. We have our peers, whether we are adults or children, who look to us as examples, as guides, as benchmarks. Whether we like it or not, we are always teaching.

We can teach with one word or with many words. We can teach with an expression, a raised eyebrow. We can teach with an explosion of temper or we can teach by taking a deep breath and counting to 10. We can teach with a reasoned argument or a simple act of charity. Or cruelty. In fact, the one thing we *can’t* do, really, is to avoid teaching.

And even if we don’t teach anyone else, we teach ourselves. Look at poor Peter. Do you think he didn’t think back to the incident described in today’s Gospel lesson on the day that his Lord was crucified? On the day that he betrayed his Lord three times before the cock crowed twice? Do you think he didn’t remember rebuking Jesus, saying that this must never happen? I’m sure he did. I’m sure he remembered his own words again and again.

So, should we simply admit that we can’t teach perfectly, so that we should just do what we can and be happy with that? I don’t think that is what James is saying. He doesn’t want to let us off the hook quite that easily. Our words are like fire, they can burn, they can burn us, they can burn others, like the fires of hell. What we say and how we say it are important. Words create a world and the nature of that world is defined by the words we say and live. We can’t avoid responsibility for our words.

To be sure, our tongues are a restless evil, full of poison. They wound and inflame and discourage. They are the worst part of us. But our tongues are also the best part of us. With words we praise, we encourage, we bless, we teach. We will not give offense by what we say if we don't say anything. But neither will we do much good. So teaching is a great risk but it is a risk we cannot avoid, very much like life.

Edward Marquart, a pastor in Seattle, encourages the following mental experiment. I'm going to think all sorts of kind thoughts of thanksgiving and praise about all of you. OK? I'll start now. (Good long pause, looking around the nave.) There. Doesn't that feel good? Don't you feel all warm and tingly? No?

Ah, maybe it wasn't heartfelt enough. Tell you what. I'm going to send out all sorts of good feelings about each of you, warm feelings of love and acceptance. (Another pause, looking around the nave.) There. Don't you feel loved and cared for? No?

You see the point. God didn't give us only brains to think thanksgiving and praise. God didn't give us only hearts to feel love and acceptance. He gave us *tongues*, to *proclaim* our thanksgiving and praise, to *talk about* our love and acceptance. To want to hear praise, to hear people's thanks and love is not weak or silly or wrong. It is something about the way we are made, a way in which all of us are the same. Teachers use words because words are what we have, for worse but also for better.

And the teacher, too, learns by teaching. Peter *became* the rock on which the church would be built. He was not born wise, he stumbled and blundered and finally, over time and over many mistakes, some of them terrible mistakes, became a wise and confident leader of the church. Paul was a persecutor of the church, until he became one of the great builders and protectors of the church. Martin Luther was both a great fool and a great reformer.

Kathleen Norris tells us of the terse advice for living offered by Father Anthony to a novice monk. “Do not trust your own virtuousness, do not worry about a thing once it has been done, control your tongue and your belly.” Another way to put it – speak carefully, control your appetites, don’t look back and rely on God.

And maybe that’s as good an answer as we are going to get in this life. Yes, we make mistakes, we will say the wrong thing and we will say the right thing in the wrong way, and yes, mistakes are bad and can be very bad. And we will make them. And we will regret them. And we will move on. And all the way, all the time, we will be teaching. God help us.

As James told us last week, faith without works is dead. We need to walk the talk. But we are also a learning community, a teaching community. And that means we need to talk the walk. However perilous, frustrating and scary. Not many of us should be teachers. But I give thanks every day for those who are.

Amen.