

The first time I saw a cow's tongue in the grocery store, I was grossed-out. I think I was 10 or so – we'd just moved to Arizona from Illinois, and it may have been my first trip to the grocery store down the street. So many things were already very different than they were in my little town of Mundelein, Illinois – we lived in eastern Scottsdale along the Pima reservation, so I went to school with some of the children from that community, as well as some Hispanics who lived nearby. My guess is that the tongue was for people from one of these two cultures – and while I love most kinds of food, the idea of eating something that grey and furry just didn't work for me. I remember standing there, staring at it in fascination – removed from the rest of the body, it looked alien and odd to me. As a former country girl, I was used to seeing a cow's tongue grabbing at some hay or even licking my arm for the sweaty, salty taste of my skin, but laid out on a bed of parsley in a plastic tray was another thing altogether!

Aside from being a delicacy to eat, tongues are pretty amazing things – and most animals possess one. Their primary purpose is to aid with the act of eating – pulling in and pushing food to the back of the mouth, providing taste so that a being might eat enough to sustain itself, and starting the digestive process with salivation that occurs in the mouth as the tongue moves.

Tongues also are used to make sounds – animals communicate with clucking, clicking and whistling sounds that occur with the help of the tongue. In humans, tongues help form sounds which become words – and putting words together is one of the primary methods of communication between humans.

Our English language has adopted many uses of the word tongue to describe a wide variety of situations. Consider the following list: native tongue, sharp tongue, forked tongue, tongue-tied, mother tongue, tip of your tongue, tongue and groove, tongue depressor, tongue twister, tongues a-wagging, silver-tongued, speaking in tongues, bite your tongue, cat got your tongue, and hold your tongue. And just a little FYI – in the search I conducted for “uses of the word tongue” on Google, Shakespeare wins the prize for using the word in reference more than anyone else – even more than the Bible!

With all these potential uses of the word, I suppose it's no wonder that our friend James, brother of Jesus and champion of the early church, spent a little time talking about how the tongue (as metaphor for “speaking words”) – attached to a person who misuses it – could be a horrible, out of control demon of the human body.

Let's hear what James says, according to The Message version:

### **James 3**

#### **When You Open Your Mouth**

***Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.***

***A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!***

***It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.***

***This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!***

***My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?***

When we hear this version, we realize that James was absolutely right about one thing. The tongue can be an amazing gift, offering blessings and hope – praising God and others who believe. But, that same tongue has the potential to “ruin the world” as a wanton killer. Those are some pretty strong images, and yet, if we consider the context he was writing in, we see why even in those days, James was worried about what people might say. His early church was struggling to take hold and grow – many of his people were scattered all over the known world, and because their only real communication was by the spoken word, it was crucial to all concerned that anything said to anyone else be accurate and true. The fate of Christianity rested on how well everyone communicated with one another.

His counsel was necessary – and since we know that the dispersed tribes had a history of some very human grumbling and back-biting – James was wise to specifically bring this up and send it out to the people.

I can also truly appreciate how James refers to the act of teaching the Way of God, and how teachers must be so very careful of what they say. While James was probably referring to the new converts instructing other new converts in the early church, I think it's safe to say that most teachers in this time also feel a call to their work even though they generally can't talk about God in class. They're in the classroom to make the world better, (some feel it's their mission!) and the analogy fits. Since we're honoring teachers and students today, it's appropriate to use this context to consider how James' words relate to us right now.

Like many of you, I've been on both sides – I've been a student and I've also been a teacher. As a former middle school teacher and professor in the College of Education, I've learned that if you are going to teach, you must be very careful about what you say. Students don't miss a thing, and you just never know when something you say can make a permanent impact on a kid – in a good way or a bad one.

I spent a fair amount of time reminding new teachers at ASU West that they were in a position of power, and anything they said inside and outside the classroom could influence how children feel

about themselves. When applied properly, using the tongue positively can change lives, and I wanted to be sure they understood the value of considering each child's need to be recognized and verbally, publicly appreciated.

I can speak from experience on this point; in my youth, a caring teacher brought me up from my personal self-doubt at that crucial time in my adolescent life.

As a new student to Arizona fresh from the countryside in Illinois, I was on the receiving end of some really awful teasing through fifth and sixth grade. By the time I hit middle school, I was pretty miserable about just having to attend school at all, and I felt friendless. I didn't know why the other kids didn't like me – but I was very aware that for some reason, I was someone most of the other kids avoided.

My 7<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom and science teacher, Mr. Wilson, must have seen my misery, because in the course of the early part of that school year, his words and the actions that supported them brought a radical change to my life. Mr. Wilson stopped me after school one day and told me he'd noticed some artwork I did – he said he was looking for someone to do his bulletin boards, and he wondered if I was interested. Now in those days, this was a huge responsibility - evidence that a student was worthy - and had a special relationship with the teacher. You had to BE somebody to be asked by a teacher to create the bulletin boards!

Of course, I jumped at the chance to do something beside sit by myself at lunch, and so I set to work – the first board I created was of our solar system with all the planets and some pretty fancy stars. Since I worked before school and during lunch, and the board was covered while the work took place, the other kids didn't know who did it, or what it looked like.

When it was finally finished, Mr. Wilson called me to the front of the class, and presented my work to the other students by introducing me as the amazing artist who did his bulletin board. He even made a small paper plaque that said, "Made by Janie Jones." When the other kids heard his praise and saw my work, suddenly, I wasn't an untouchable anymore. It didn't take much, but because he was a favorite teacher and loved by most of the kids, his verbal support made all the difference in my life. If Mr. Wilson thought I was an OK student, then I must be OK and worthy of their time. Aren't middle school kids shallow?

Pretty soon, a couple of girls invited me to be their friend (which is, of course, how it's done), and when the first dance rolled around, (and in spite of the fact that my parents were chaperones!), I had fun and danced a little with a couple of boys. And as good teachers tend to do, Mr. Wilson continued to guide me all through seventh grade and helped me find myself. It was a turning point in my life – from that year forward, I discovered new confidence, realized that school was something I loved, and gathered many friends and good times along the way.

Many years later, as I worked to be that same kind of teacher for my students, I often returned to the memory of Mr. Wilson's words and what he did for me. I learned how powerful using my tongue to share honest recognition can be – Mr. Wilson's words gave me new life, and helped me learn to appreciate and respect myself.

If I were to ask each of you this morning, I bet many of you would also have a story about a teacher who impacted your life in a good way – James said being a teacher is a huge responsibility, and he was right!

And we also need to heed James' words of warning about the destructive power of the tongue. Those who selected the scripture for the Lectionary that churches use must have realized that this message needs revisiting on a regular basis, because churches are communities full of people who talk!

Today, in addition to the spoken word, there are new technologies available to us for communication, and *with* all this technology, there are even more ways to say things! While our actions certainly still speak for us, most people continue to react strongest to what is said to them, how it's said, and what is meant by what is said – even in emails.

We all know – and most have experienced - it is too easy to open our literal and figurative mouths and spout something completely inappropriate – something so awful it can change someone's life or ruin a relationship. There are challenges with this form of communicating...

And in spite of new technology, the tongue is still a maker of magic images and amazing sounds – but it only takes a few, short, inappropriate words shared among others to kill something beautiful between people. Remember what James has told us - God doesn't want this kind of interaction! In our modern time, we especially need to take care when we interact with others – we need to think and speak like Jesus – and we need to allow our tongues to lift others up instead of tear them down, because all children of God deserve respect and honor – and if we live God's Way and want to build up the Church, we should remember this and act accordingly.

Well, I think God wants us to be like good teachers Mr. Wilson...God wants us to use the tool of the spoken word to build up the church – to build up the world, and to speak the truth – God's Truth. It's easier than we think – we just have to remember that, with God at the center of what we say, the right words will find their way out of our mouths, and we'll be able to do God's work without having to think so hard.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory*, puts this thought in some great perspective...I've paraphrased it here.

***“Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship...All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to this destination. It is in the light of this overwhelming possibility, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to it, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”***

May we speak to all from the Heart of God.

May we use our tongues to tell God's Story and Truth, and follow through with actions that speak louder than words.

God's Peace to us all! Amen.