

TALK LIKE A CHRISTIAN

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Proverbs 12:13-22
James 3:1-12

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Avast, me hearties! Shiver me timbers! Arrrrrr! I know this is an odd way to begin a sermon, but you might want to start practicing your pirate talk, because this coming Wednesday, September 19, is "Talk like a Pirate Day." If you're not familiar with this international holiday, you've probably been spending your time on good and important things instead of surfing the web looking for odd and amusing things. If you would like to know more about "Talk like a Pirate Day," just type it into your web browser and you will be taken to the official website. There, you'll be able to find some guidelines to help you celebrate the day at home, at work, or anywhere you happen to be.

The Talk like a Pirate Day was invented by a couple of guys while playing racket ball back in June of 1995. For several years, they celebrated the day privately among themselves, widening the circle only as they coaxed additional friends to join in the fun. But in 2002, writer and humorist Dave Barry heard about it and he ended up writing a column about it. Barry invited all his readers from Cleveland, Ohio to Sidney, Australia to join the movement and to celebrate "Talk like a Pirate" day. Even though the holiday is most widely celebrated on college campuses, but if you want to join in on the holiday fun on Wednesday, feel free to replace "good morning or hi" when greeting someone with "Ahoy!" If the individual protests, you can always call him or her a scurvy dog who will soon be walking the plank. And don't hesitate to add an adjective or two in front of your name for the day – like Bloody Bill or Mad Dog Mary...

Even as you consider whether or not you will participate in "Talk like a Pirate Day, I encourage you to consider a very different word related invitation today. In our Epistle reading, James shares some insight as he points out the powerful affect words can have. "Look at ships," says James, "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." (vs. 4-5)

There is a story that comes out of Scotland. It's about a man who lived in a village and who passed along a story about another man that he didn't like. At the time, he thought the story was true, and being that he wanted to believe it, it didn't take much for him to do so. The thing is, the story was not true. But by the time he discovered that the rumor was false, it had already destroyed the man's life – his family, job and integrity were all devastated, and the man was forced to leave the town defeated and disgraced. The man who passed on the story went to his pastor and admitted that he had destroyed a man with his words. He told the whole story, and he then said, "I'm sorry – can I be forgiven of this sin?"

The pastor told the man that this was not so simple, and told him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the man found this to be a strange request from a pastor he really wanted forgiveness, so he followed the instructions. At last he came back to the pastor and said, "I have done all that you asked, may I now be forgiven?"

"Not yet," said the pastor. "You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village."

"But – I could never do that, the wind has carried the feathers away!"

"Yes, and in like manner your careless words have destroyed an innocent man!"

It's like James said, the tongue may be small but it is powerfully influential. Let's consider the devastating impact of gossiping and bullying in the lives of individuals. Most of us have heard plenty of stories about how negative, abusive and even lying words have caused deep hurt, depression, and even led to suicide. Perhaps, some of you here today have felt personally the impact of hurtful, destructive words.

"You are too small to play basketball," says a youth league coach.

"You are such a loser," says a popular kid in the middle-school cafeteria.

"You are ugly and no one likes you," states a Face book post.

"You are too old to go back to school," says a friend.

"You can't be a Christian and believe that!" scolds a church member.

"You better not tell your parents, no one will believe you," warns an abusive uncle.

There have been lots of ugly, destructive words over the years – words spoken out of anger, pettiness, revenge, hurt, abuse, betrayal..."

James emphasizes the devastating power of words, when he says, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire." (vs. 5-6) He also describes the tongue as "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (vs. 8) He acknowledges that the tongue is hard to tame, and too often used to discourage, deceive and destroy. But that is not the whole story, because the faithful can instead choose to use words that reflect the living and abiding presence of Christ in our lives. James challenges us to talk like a Christian – not like a pirate, or an impatient driver, or a mobster, or like those who have no faith. What this means is that we do not use our tongues to "bless the Lord and Father" one moment, and then "curse those who are made in the likeness of God" the next (vs. 9). It's not appropriate for a Christian to express enthusiastic praise to God on Sunday morning, and then allow hurtful and destructive words to flow from our mouth throughout the week while we are at home, work, and any number of other places.

So, what does it mean for us to talk like a Christian? What's involved? When it comes right down to it, it's actually much easier to talk like a pirate, since all one needs to do is accent our speech with words like, "Ahoy, Avast, Ayeeee and Arrr!" Talking like a Christian requires so much more than a small, specific vocabulary. To talk like a Christian first of all means seeing others not as "scurvy rats," but as men and women created in the image and likeness of God, breathed into being with the very breath of God (Genesis 1:26; 2:7). At the beginning of the book of Genesis, we are told that there is a holiness built into each human being, a sacredness that comes straight from the Creator. Yes, it may sometimes be difficult to see that holiness in certain people, and yet we miss an important aspect of all human existence when we overlook it. Every person bears the image of God, even if he or she has strayed far from God's way. If you are able to believe this about your most annoying neighbor and your most irritating co-worker and your most disliked rival, then you are much more likely to be able to talk like a Christian not just one day a year, but everyday.

Besides believing that every person is created in the image of God, to talk like a Christian also means that our words should always be a reflection of the Word of God. Looking once again to Genesis, we see that God's Word is creative – not destructive. God says, "Let there be light..." and there is light. God says, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind..." and there are cattle and creeping things and all types of wild animals (Gen. 1:3, 20, 24). God's words are creative and life-giving, they bring order out of chaos, and the result is always something that is very good.

Can the same be said of your words? Before we open our mouths to speak, we would be wise to apply the "Genesis Test" to what we are about to say. Is it creative and life-giving? Does it bring order out of chaos? Are the results good? If not, it's much better to bite our tongue and remain silent.

James is very aware that our words do not always pass the Genesis test – sometimes they are creative but at other times they are quite destructive. “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” (vs. 10) It’s better for us to keep our mouths shut than to pollute the creative, life-giving Word of God with a destructive word of ugly gossip or unfair criticism. It’s better to say nothing than to create chaos where God intends order and blessing.

Of course, one of the very best ways for us to know what it is to talk like a Christian is to look to Jesus, the One who is THE Word of God in human form. Jesus took speech very seriously, and he issued numerous warnings about the consequences of our words. He emphasized that words have the power of life or death; they have the ability to build up or break down.

Consider for a moment how Jesus’ words of love and forgiveness had a radically different impact when compared with the typical words of hate and condemnation that were often being thrown around by others. Consider the radically unexpected and life-giving outcome that unfolded as the result of Jesus’ words to a woman caught in adultery, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her...” (John 8:7). Consider the unexpected outcome when everyone was insisting that blind Bartimaeus be quiet and leave Jesus alone, but Jesus chose words that invited him to come closer and then he said, “...your faith has made you well.” (Mark 10:52) Consider the unexpected, life-giving results when Jesus approached Zaccheus, Jericho’s most hated tax collector, and said, “Hurry down” from that tree; “for I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:5)

Through Jesus, we clearly see how words of love and forgiveness have a radically different impact than words of hate and condemnation. In a day and age when hurtful, angry, destructive, and simply ugly words are too often the “go to” choice, God’s Word reminds us that the words we choose to use are a “big deal.” As Christians, our words, like Jesus’ words, should bring life to others and result in that which is good for this world.

The Book of Proverbs contains a whole lot of wise advice when it comes to that which comes out of mouths. Our particular lesson from Proverbs 12 says, “The evil are ensnared by the transgression of their lips, but the righteous escape from trouble. From the fruit of the mouth one is filled with good things... Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment... Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.” (Proverbs 12:13-22)

You can certainly decide for yourself whether or not to participate in Talk like a Pirate Day on Wednesday; either way it probably won’t seriously affect you or others – unless you slip up and call your boss a “scalawag.” But in a society where we are mostly told that we can say anything we want and it’s all okay – where words are too often like “deadly poison” or a “consuming fire” – God challenges us to keep close tabs on our tongue. If we are going to talk like a Christian, then our words must be creative and life-giving, they must never cause chaos but instead order and blessing, and the end result must clearly be good. As I end my message today, I leave you with not a scriptural proverb, and yet, I think it is a very wise proverb non-the-less. “Be careful with your tongue. It is in a wet place and can easily slip.” Amen.