

Spring Training for the Christian Team

Lent 4: Taming the Tongues

(Jeremiah 9: 1-9; James 3: 1-12; Psalm 34; Matthew 15: 1-11)

Did you know that Abraham Lincoln's coffin was pried open twice after he had taken up residence in it? It's one of those gems of historical trivia that's not very well known, but it's a fact. Twice, after the great man had been laid to rest, his casket was unearthed and his remains exposed.

One might be inclined to think that, since Lincoln's death was a matter of foul play and since there were a number of questions about his assassination that remained unanswered, the purpose of opening the casket would have been to gather some further evidence about his death. But that's not why Abraham Lincoln's casket was opened. The reason was simply this, that a rumour had begun to sweep across the country, and the rumour was that Lincoln's coffin was empty. Well, a select group of witnesses stood by his grave on that day, some 22 years after his assassination. They observed with their own eyes that the rumour was totally false, and then they watched as the casket was carefully sealed again, this time with lead.

It happened a second time, 14 years later. The great man's withered body was viewed again, this time by even more witnesses. And do you know why the casket was opened again? For the same grim purpose. Incredible as it may seem, and despite the fact that there were signed affidavits from each of the witnesses on that previous occasion, the very same rumour had again been planted in the public mind. That rumour buzzed in so many ears and applied so much pressure that the same ghoulish ceremony had to be carried out again. Despite the particularly strong protests of Lincoln's family, the casket lid was raised once more. Again the rumour proved to be quite false. Finally, in an effort to bury that rumour as deeply and securely as the casket, the great president was laid to rest in a solid stone crypt.

How terribly unfair, cruel and disrespectful it seems, and so hard to believe, yet when you think about it, there's really nothing surprising about that story. That's exactly what rumours are like, and that's what they can do. In the hands of people who don't have the facts, and more importantly, people who don't care that they don't have the facts, that's the kind of power even the most ridiculous rumour can acquire. That's the kind of roaring beast even the stupidest little snippet of a rumour can become, and when rumour becomes a beast it is capable of prying open more caskets, exposing more closet skeletons and stirring up more choking, scandalous dust than any other tool on earth.

In his play *King Henry IV*, William Shakespeare wrote these highly instructive and memorable lines:

Rumour is a pipe
Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures,
And of so easy and so plain a stop
That even the blunt monster with uncounted heads,
Even the discordant wavering multitude,
Can play upon it.

And how the multitudes do indeed play on that pipe! Their sour melodies regularly penetrate so many idle conversations, so many telephone calls, coffee chats and e-mail messages, that the noise becomes unbearable. Rumour, so generously fed by the blunt monster with uncounted heads, becomes a beast that will tear apart and viciously devour anyone who crosses its path.

It's interesting that the people who unleash this beast, and who willingly sacrifice others to it, are only rarely beast-like themselves. More often they are the ordinary, quiet, perhaps insecure types who merely cater to the small-minded suspicions of others, and who will often use any device that might keep the spotlight focused away from themselves. Just as often, the purveyors of rumours will be the self-righteous types who fancy themselves innocent of all things—innocent even of spreading rumours. They find comfort in being only the “channel” of their cruel information, and never the source of it. Reporting only what “they say” or what “someone told me”; asking only “have you heard?” or “did you know?” they leave open a convenient back door and a line of retreat lest the rumour should somehow be traced back to their lips. But with each supposedly innocent repetition of the gossipy delight, the beast is unleashed, and that beast is completely oblivious to the truth, to the reputations involved and the human feelings at stake. It will destroy and devour anyone. It has a voracious appetite and is not easily filled.

At the root of this terrible, frightening problem and at the heart of that awful beast, there lies a very small, very unspectacular thing. To a physician or a scientist, it's nothing more than a two-ounce slab of mucous membrane enclosing a complex array of tiny muscles and nerves. One of creation's real wonders, considering its small size, this little muscle is as clever as they come. It enables our bodies to taste, chew and swallow—without which life would not only be short, but bland. Better still, it enables us to articulate distinct sounds that can comprise an entire system of communication—which is not only helpful but utterly essential in a world as complicated and dangerous as this. Without this little two-ounce wonder, no mother could sing her baby to sleep. No teacher could expand the minds of students. The truth could never be

defended in court. Words of tender comfort and inspiring instruction would never be heard. Communication between humans would be reduced to unintelligible grunts and shrugs, as it often is among teenagers. Seldom do we consider just how valuable and vital that strange little muscle in our mouths really is.

But the tongue, unfortunately, is just as volatile as it is vital. The poet Washington Irving once quipped, “The tongue is the only edged tool that grows sharper with constant use.” And as the writer of the New Testament Letter of James observed and warned long ago, “The tongue is a fire...a restless evil and full of deadly poison.”

In our ongoing Lenten series of “practice games” against the various opponents to faith, today’s game will surely be the toughest. Of all the opponents and enemies of faith, there are none so dangerous, so slippery, quick and deadly as the human tongue. And that’s amazing because on its own, the tongue certainly appears innocent enough. Neatly hidden behind the ivory gates, its movements are an intriguing study in coordination. It can curl itself into a cheery whistle or stretch itself in a lazy yawn. It can deftly flick a husk of popcorn from between two molars, and it can savour the taste of a peppermint, switching it back and forth from side to side without once getting nipped. It can allow a trumpeter to play “The Flight of the Bumblebee” without making a single mistake. It can launch the most beautiful and comforting sounds you will ever hear in life. But let your thumb get smashed with a hammer or your toe get clobbered on a chair, and the tongue will soon show another side of its nature. And let the least snippet of a rumour come unchallenged into your ear, and you just watch that slippery muscle go into deadly production.

For all its cleverness and helpfulness, the human tongue generally remains untamed. In fact, as the Letter of James describes it, the tongue simply cannot be tamed. We may be able to train all manner of animals to do the most incredibly complex things—we can train pigeons to carry messages, dogs to fetch the paper, dolphins to locate underwater explosives, or elephants to perch on a ball. But the tongue? Impossible, says James. And that’s a real tragedy, not just for James but mostly for us. Do you know why? It’s because when James made that comment, he wasn’t writing an editorial column on society in general, nor was he speaking broadly of human nature. The fact is that he was speaking to the Church. He was speaking to Christian people about distinctly Christian behaviour, and even in this context and for this audience, he felt the tongue could not be tamed.

There is, I’m convinced, a note of bitterness in these words of James, and if that’s the case, I’ll just bet it was the result of his own experience—no doubt, at the receiving end of

some supposedly Christian tongues. What James was trying to convey was that of all the things that demonstrate the Christian difference in life, in attitudes and behaviour, the tongue ought to be the most noticeable and the most helpful. The Christian tongue ought to be manifestly different from all other tongues. This is the one tongue that really ought to be tamed, and from it should flow nothing but Christian love and compassion, forgiveness, encouragement, comfort and praise. This is the tongue that ought to put out fires, not start new ones, and that ought to stop the rumours, rather than start them. This is the tongue that really ought to be tamed, and yet sadly, strangely, scandalously for us, it is not. And it does appear to be untameable.

Well, the pessimistic conclusion of James leaves us in a difficult, awkward position today. What should we do? Do we accept his view, resign ourselves to human weakness, and then go our merry way spreading fire and poison with these untameable tongues, and then later, perhaps, ask for God's forgiveness? Or, should we perhaps be prepared to try at least a little harder? And what do we do about our exhibition match against the Tongues this morning? Do we simply forfeit the game to these slippery opponents, or do we rise to the challenge and fight harder, and maybe try some new strategy?

In reality, there is no choice. This "game" against the tongues is far more than a game, just like last week's brush against the Thorns. It's more than a game, and there's more at stake in this contest than we might realize. The human tongue is, and has always been, the single most important tool for the task of making clear to those around us the real difference about Christian living, and the real difference Christ's healing, saving power can make. And in a world that needs more than ever before to hear precisely what that Christian difference is, the Church cannot afford, for a single moment, to stop trying to tame the tongues. Of course the contest will not be an easy one, but with Christ on our side and with a few timely rules and common-sense guidelines, let's give it our very best effort.

Here are three elements of strategy that we will need to keep firmly and clearly in our minds in the battle against the Tongues. Rule Number One: *Think First!* To beat the tongue, you have to make the first move, and you make that move with your mind. Before you open your lips to let your tongue start wiggling, pause for at least few seconds and mentally preview your words. Ask yourself: are these words kind, or are they cutting? Are they necessary, or needless? Are they accurate, or exaggerated? Are they grateful, or complaining? You see, for all its quickness and cleverness, the tongue has no brain. This is the only advantage we humans have over the tongue: that there is usually another organ in our cranial cavity that can

be even quicker than the tongue. Think about your words before you let them go, because once they're out there, it's impossible to get them back, and sometimes it simply is not possible to undo the damage a word can do. Think about the sound your tongue is planning to make before you send it off into space. Think, also, before you speak, about the feelings of the person at whom your tongue is pointing.

Rule Number Two is equally simple: *Talk Less!* Your tongue's chances of blowing it are directly proportional to the amount of time you spend with your mouth open. One of the ancient Greek philosophers confessed, "I have often regretted my speech, but never my silence." Learn to care enough about your words, not merely to select the right ones, but to refrain from using them at all, when that restraint would serve a greater good. Sometimes holding our tongues is far, far better than even the most eloquent use we could possibly make of them.

The third rule is the best of all: *Start Today!* This is a project most of us have been putting off long enough, and a contest we have been avoiding at our own peril—and at the greater peril of those who live within earshot of us. Start today! There is a great, unforgettable illustration for this rule. It can be seen in an old English churchyard, carved into a very old slab of limestone:

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,
Lies Arabella Young,
Who, on the 24th of May,
Began to hold her tongue.

Isn't that precious? And wouldn't you love to have an epitaph like that carved on your stone? Arabella Young waited too long. Let's you and me start today. Taming the tongue is a task that may well take a lifetime, so let's not wait any longer to get started.

Starting today, let's spend more time using our tongues to affirm our faith and confess our sins, to sing our praise and offer our prayers. And let's start holding our tongues to stop the rumours, to nip the complaints and criticism, to silence for good any un-Christian comments. Let's at least *try* taming these tongues and see if you—and maybe everyone else—can notice the difference.