

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fifth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons: 1

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Chapter of the Proverbs.²

“A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger. The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness. The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good. A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit. A fool despiseth his father’s instruction: but he that regardeth reproof is prudent. In the house of the righteous is much treasure: but in the revenues of the wicked is trouble. The lips of the wise disperse knowledge: but the heart of the foolish doeth not so. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight. The way of the wicked is an abomination unto the LORD: but he loveth him that followeth after righteousness. Correction is grievous unto him that forsaketh the way: and he that hateth reproof shall die. ... The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD: but the words of the pure are pleasant words.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the General Epistle of Blessed James the Apostle.³

“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little

member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ☐ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

I am no Talmudic scholar – in fact, I read neither Hebrew nor Aramaic – so I am dependent on others for the little I know about orthodox Jewish law and practice. In fact, my two best sources are the cultural commentator Leo Rosten and the mystery author Harry Kemelman. You may remember the latter's wonderful series of murder mysteries that feature Rabbi David Small of Barnard's Crossing, Massachusetts and that began with "Friday the Rabbi Slept Late". That particular book was later made into a TV movie in which Jackie Gleason's old sidekick, Art Carney at a much more advanced age than in "The Honeymooners" – played the small town police chief who observes the Rabbi's detection efforts.

Theme:

In one of his books, Kemelman has Rabbi Small tell someone that in the Jewish tradition, defamation is ranked with homicide in terms of the seriousness of the damage done to its victim. If one robs a person of his or her good name, Rabbi Small explains, one has taken from him or her a major part of what makes life worth living. In this view, if you destroy someone's reputation, you might as well finish the job and kill that person, because he or she has little or nothing left.

Development:

I do not agree with those old scholars that a person cannot survive disgrace, for I am old enough to remember the meteoric rise of John Profumo, once the British Minister of Defence, and his even more precipitous fall. That, like so many politicians' comeuppances, was occasioned by his poor choice of girl friends. That is an error that almost no man in public life seems ever to overcome; so far as I know, only Bill Clinton has surmounted it with no more damage than a few pointed jokes, especially about parsing onesyllable verbs,⁵ and some unflattering footnotes in the history books.

Of course, Profumo had the advantage of having inherited a fortune, which freed him from any necessity of working for a living, so he could spend twelve years of cleaning toilets and performing other odd jobs for a major national charity, for which he eventually became a manager and chief fundraiser. That was all it took for him to claw his way back up to those pinnacles of British respectability, a CBE and a handshake from the Queen.

Then there was the Richard Nixon, who essentially did nothing but outlive his critics so that commentators with short memories claimed he had been rehabilitated.

Nevertheless, Profumo's case, and perhaps Nixon's, if one thinks he really was restored to public esteem, were unusual situations. Usually, the result of public scandal, deserved or undeserved, is lasting embarrassment. A typical example is the late Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who was forced to resign as Inspector General of the Dutch Armed Forces and from an array of high-profile corporate and charitable positions when he was found to have taken bribes from an American military contractor.

Shortly before his death – nearly three decades after he had retired from public life in the wake of the procurement scandal and more than two decades after his wife abdicated and his daughter ascended the Dutch throne, that is, when he had long receded almost completely into the background of Dutch affairs – he told an interviewer, “I have accepted that the word ‘Lockheed’ will be carved on my tombstone.”

So today's Second Lesson reminds us that the tongue can be a brutal weapon. The same organ that can communicate sympathy, express understanding, and speak words of comfort can, when used recklessly or with malice, also damage, dishearten, and destroy. It can, in St. James' words, start a wildfire that is beyond anyone's ability to extinguish, leaving only scorched devastation in its wake.

There are very few things that distinguish us, as human beings, from the higher orders of the animal kingdom.

Among those distinctions are the capacities for rational and abstract thought and the ability to communicate complex thoughts in words. These are the bases for all human culture and, if you think about it, they are chief among the ways in which we bear the image of God.⁶

Conclusion:

But if our ability to speak complex ideas is truly a gift from God, and as the story of the Tower of Babel⁷ tells us, it certainly is that, then we should never use that gift to injure other men and women. They, after all, are God's creatures to exactly the same extent as are we and He loves them just as He loves us, no more and no less.

It is one thing when a person is brought down by true reports of his or her own willful behavior. But it is quite another when he or she is ruined by the recklessly flapping tongues of those who simply do not care that they are using a divine faculty for unworthy ends or, even worse, who are doing so out of ill will, to destroy a rival or to humble one who is envied.

Those heedless souls had best remember that "[T]he tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell."⁸

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*1 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF
COMMON*

PRAYER xxviii (PECUSA 1928).

2 Proverbs 15: 1-10, 26 (KJV).

3 James 3 (KJV).

4 James 3: 5-6 (RSV).

*5 Such as his immortal answer to one question, "That depends on what
you mean by 'is'."*

6 See, e.g., Genesis 1: 26-27, 5: 1 & 9: 6; James 3: 9.

7 Genesis 11: 1-9.

8 James 3: 5-6 (RSV).

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