

Pastor T.C. Arnold
5th Sunday of Easter
James 1:16-21
April 28th, 2013

“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Words of wisdom are words to keep in mind – words to live by. No more is that evident than in these wise words from St. James. But James is not the only one to say that it is beneficial to shut up and listen. Proverbs, sometimes referred to as the Book of Wisdom, is filled with this specific advice. It says, *“When words are many, sin is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is wise”* (10:19). *“He that keeps his mouth keeps his life; but he that opens wide his lips will have destruction”* (13:3). *“Even a fool when he holds his speech is counted wise”* (17:28).

You have heard it said that it is better to keep your mouth shut and thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt. We are given two ears and only one mouth for a reason – so that we may hear more and speak less. It is true that we need to hear more... more of our neighbors burdens so that we may know more how to help them carry the load. Hear more from those who are concerned so that we may understand more what is troubling them. Hearing... listening... is a good thing. Proverbs, James, even our Savior would agree.

However, speaking in and of itself is not a sin. We dare not suggest that. I mean after all Jesus said, *“Go and make Disciples by baptizing and teaching...”* You have to say something if you are going to teach. I’ve heard it said, *“Preach the Gospel. Use words if necessary.”* Please, if you are going to preach the Gospel, use Words. The Gospel is the Word made flesh – Jesus for our life. You can show love with your actions but the Word of God is what reveals the Gospel. That Word is heard, read, and spoken.

Speak the Word of God. Our problem with words is that our speaking at times is not well thought out... it’s misguided... it’s, at times, unnecessary. The problem is with words that are not Gospel Words. And this is where we go back to James chapter one. *“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...”* These words, *“slow to speak”* have their meaning plainly spelled out seven short verses later when James says, *“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”*

Our speaking too quickly, or when it is out of turn, has unintended consequences. What I mean is our speaking without listening puts our own feelings, ideas, and wisdom above our neighbor’s worries or concerns. We put ourselves above others when we speak too fast. We miss what our brother or sister is saying when we shut them up and start speaking without regard to what our words might be doing. Even if someone is speaking falsely, I implore you to hear them out – be slow to speak. Then, when the time is right, speak what is right in the hopes you can win your brother or sister with the truth spoken in love. That’s the way St. Paul would say to do it... *“Speak the truth in love,”* it says in Ephesians chapter four. A loving speech comes from a speech that is *“slow to anger.”* Which, by the way, St. James has something to say about as well.

Now, I get it. This sermon is one that has a good deal of instruction on how to speak – what to speak – what not to speak. You may already have a good handle on all this but it’s good to be reminded. The reason: we have a hard time putting it into practice. Now I want to consider what I just mentioned: anger. James says, *“Be slow to anger.”* This begs the question: Is anger ever

appropriate? Absolutely. There is a place in life for the blazing anger of rebuke. The world would be a poorer place without those who blazed in pure white anger against the abuses of the tyrannies of sin. But too often this is made an excuse, not for real and righteous anger, but for petulant and self-centered irritation.

We will be tempted to be angry with the slow and backward, and still more with the lazy. But, except on the rarest occasions, he will achieve more by encouraging than by the lash of the tongue. We are tempted by anger. But we lose the power in our speaking when we do not make clear by every word and gesture that we love each other. When anger gives the impression of hatred, dislike and contempt, then it has no power to convert the souls of men. Anger is much more likely to produce a stubborn resistance. The accent of love always has more power than the accent of anger. And when anger becomes constant, then it always does more harm than good.

I really think James is on to something (of course he is... these are God's Words). When we are quick to speak it's easy to become angry. And we do not win the day nor our brother or sister that way. Look at our Lord in His most crucial hour. No one was more "slow to speak" or "slow to anger" than Jesus on that Thursday and Friday of Holy Week.

When the hour of Jesus had come in that Garden of Gethsemane, all Jesus would say to the temple guard is "*I am the one you are seeking...*" and to Judas, "*Are you betraying the son of man with a kiss?*" And then we know of the short answers given to the Sanhedrin during secret and illegal meeting at night and to Pilate as He stood before the Roman Governor in the Praetorium. The loudest and the boldest speech that He could give was Himself, the Word made flesh, standing before His accusers, making the loudest and the most peaceful Gospel proclamation that there has ever been.

Jesus knows, and we should know as well, anger does not produce the righteousness of God. That's exactly what James says. No, the righteousness of God is produced by the work of Jesus, His bleeding, and dying on the cross. The righteousness of God is produced in you by the work of the Holy Spirit that works faith, that you should believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

We cannot produce righteousness through our anger. We cannot beat people into faith. We cannot murder in order to convert. We cannot defame in order to build up. So James has it right. Slow to speak. Why? Because we need to listen first, listen long and listen hard. Our speech better not drown out the Word – God's Word – the Word made flesh. Slow to speak and quick to listen.

Hear your brother or sister in the faith. Listen to your misguided friend or neighbor. Listen before you speak. You will be counted wise with fewer, well directed words.

Slow to anger. Listen, speak and be slow to anger. Words to keep in mind – to put into practice. We need not look any further than our Lord on this one – especially the events that surround the Passion. Our Lord's Passion tells the story. And when you do speak, speak about this – the Gospel – the life in Christ. Listen to Him. Speak about Him and His Word. That Word gives life. That Word conquers death. That Word is blessed speech all its own – for you. Listen to the Gospel. It speaks forgiveness to sinners. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.