

September 13, 2015
Sermon The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St Peter Lutheran Church (Preached at Faith: Graham, TX)
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
James 3:1–12

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

James 3:1–12 (ESV)

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

There once was a man who, while listening to a sermon in church, was convicted of his sin, and he set out to do better.

“I have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed,” he’d said it week after week, but this day he especially felt like it was true. He reasoned that his evil thoughts often caught him off guard and might be difficult to change. His evil actions, he decided, were often a product of his thoughts and words.

So he decided that he would first focus on his words.

His words were more likely something he could change.

If he could catch himself before he said something he’d regret, he would also have more control over the things he did and, in time, perhaps even over the things he thought.

For a while, the man was successful. He always took his time.

He didn’t speak without considering what he would say.

He wasn’t perfect, but then who is?

As time went on, though, he found himself back to his old habits.

He hurt people with what he said. He created problems for himself with what he said.

I’ll try even harder, he thought, and he committed himself to being more diligent.

But the harder he tried, the more he failed, or so it seemed.

Finally, he gave up.

The story, really, is the same for every one of us. We've all tried and failed.

The only question then is this: What do we mean when we "give up"?
Are we simply defeated?

Or is there a "giving up" that's really moving forward?

Again this morning, the Epistle confronts all of us...Christians of every age—and so also each one of us—with the inconsistencies between faith and actions.

The warning we hear this morning is very clear, and what's also clear is that no one is immune.

"How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell" (5b–6).

In the previous chapter, James addressed the issue of favoritism, but many of us might dismiss ourselves from those charges.

"Not me; I would never show such favoritism in church!"

But now, James calls us on the carpet. His words are hard to hear because charges run deep and should cut deep into the heart of everyone who hears.

Your tongue is an agent of harm. It is on fire with the fire of hell. *"For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue"* (vv 7–8a).

No human, not one, is innocent—not you, not me, no one. And to drive the point home James reminds us of what we are all too capable of doing: we can sit here in the Divine Service, praising our God in heaven, and then leave here cursing his most precious creations, other people.

We praise God one moment, and then the next the very same tongue, the one in our mouths, can utter such horrible things about others and even to others. “Look at what he’s doing. How could he do that! Look at her. How can she look in the mirror!

Then we put ourselves in God’s place thinking or saying: Imagine what God must think about her! O God, thank you that I’m not like those people!”

St. Paul tells us: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom 3:23).

And James would agree wholeheartedly. His proof is the tongue. His proof is our tongue. Ours are tongues that cannot be tamed.

Sure, we try. We try and we try and we try. We put our mind to fixing the problem. After all, we are children of God. Such a fiery tongue is not befitting us. Wouldn’t God want us to tame it so that it speaks only words that glorify Him?

Sure he would. He does.

But the harder we try, it seems, the worse we do. *“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body”* (v 2b). But I am not a perfect man. Neither my tongue nor my body is bridled. *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* (Rom 7:24).

So, is there nothing we can do?

Are we doomed to live this life in a never-ending battle against a tongue that would just as soon destroy us as it would honor the God of our salvation?

Well, in a way, yes, and in another, no.

The battle will go on for each of us.

But the very same words of the Epistle point us toward the victory that is ours in the battle. The battles rage on, but the war is already over.

Listen again: *“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body”* (v 2b).

And here is the good news of God’s grace toward imperfect men and women such as you and me:

For this perfect Man grew up before God like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces.

He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. You recognize the words? If not, you’ll hear them when Lent rolls around again.

But He, Jesus was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet *he opened not his mouth*; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth. (Is 53:2–7, emphasis added)

“And like a sheep that before its shearers is silent.”

All is not lost, and our tongues, though they rage with the fire of hell, will not condemn us. *“If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body”* (v 2b).

There is no man who is perfect, then, except one.

There is one who is a perfect man. And He was and is perfect for you!

The one Man, Jesus Christ lived the perfect life that you and I cannot live. The one who deserved none of what He received, suffered every moment as he bore the burden of our sinful tongues.

Our Savior Jesus Christ, lived and died and rose exactly because our tongues are “a fire, a world of unrighteousness” (v 6).

He bridled his tongue even in the face of death so that we might receive His righteousness as he now lives in us. So we need not “give up,” not in the sense of living in despair or guilt. Instead, we live as children of our heavenly Father. We live as those given the inheritance of the only Son of God, who was silent on our behalf. We live by giving in.

In the waters of Holy Baptism, that fire that burns from your tongue was extinguished. Your sins are forgiven.

The Word of God that you hear fills your mind and your heart with the pure truth from God. Your sins are forgiven.

God’s Word replaces all of the “other words” and gives your tongue something righteous to speak. Your sins are forgiven.

God’s grace is a saving flood that not even the fires of hell can stand against.

And the things that you are helpless against on your own? Jesus conquers.

There is no one perfect except Jesus.

You will try to bridle your tongue and your body and your mind, but they will fail you.

And though we will never stop trying, our confidence must be in Christ—giving all things over to Him who conquers for us.

In Him we receive the forgiveness of sins that goes way beyond giving up. For, *“all things are possible for one who believes”* (Mk 9:23b).

While perfection is impossible for us, it is ours in Christ. In the forgiveness of our sins, God makes us perfect—and thus renews us, strengthens us, and guides us according to his will.

Perfection comes, but only through the one perfect Man, Jesus Christ! In Christ, the story does not end for any of us that call upon His name for our forgiveness...for our salvation.

We don't have to live in despair and uncertainty. In Christ, we live in victory.

In closing, I close with the words of St Paul to the Romans ... and those words are for you too:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24–25a).

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus!

Amen.

S.D.G.—Soli Deo Gloria