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Text: James 3:1-10

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Pentecost 15

WORDS ARE POWERFUL

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." You've probably heard this little rhyme. Do you believe it? I don't. Words can hurt - they can hurt a lot - they can hurt much more than pain inflicted by sticks and stones.

On the other hand, words can heal and comfort and build up and encourage and do all sorts of great and wonderful things.

That makes words very powerful. Words can be used for good or they can be used for ill. They can help or they can harm. Words are powerful.

The Bible readings for today talk about the words that come from our mouths. The reading from James warns us that our tongues can be deadly. The reading from Mark encourages us to use our tongues to confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

The Bible has much to say about our words. Think about the Ten Commandments. Do you realize that while there is only one commandment about killing, and only one commandment about committing adultery, and only one commandment about stealing, that there are two commandments about our tongues? That should tell us something about how important God considers the words that come from our mouths.

There is a little story that teaches us to be careful with our words. A man went to his teacher and asked, "Why did God give us two commandments about our tongues?" The teacher replied, "I will give you an answer, but first there is something I want you to do. I want you to gather a sack of feathers and place a single feather on the doorstep of each home in the village." The man did as he was told and then returned for his answer.

"There is one more thing I want you to do," the teacher said. "I want you to go back and collect all the feathers." "That will be impossible," exclaimed the man. "The wind will have blown them all away." "So it is with the words we speak," said the teacher. "They are like feathers in the wind. Once they are spoken, they cannot be retrieved." So be careful.

Be careful with all your words. In this day and age we must consider not only the words we speak, but also the words we write. Be careful with what you say in your emails and what you say on Twitter and what you post on Facebook. Perhaps you need to be even more careful with the words you transmit electronically, because there is no tone of voice or facial expressions to help interpret the meaning of the words.

When words hurt or harm they are sinful. Keep in mind that there are two kinds of sin - sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission are bad things that we do. Sins of omission are good things we fail to do. We can sin in both ways with our words. We can say words which cause hurt and we can fail to say words that would result in good.

We are probably more aware of our words which cause hurt, so let me say something about failing to say words which result in good. Failing to confess Jesus as Savior and Lord is wrong. Failing to witness to the truth is wrong. Failing to speak up for someone who is being maligned or abused or oppressed is wrong.

Failing to say even simple things can be wrong. Failing to say "thank you," or failing to say "I love you," or failing to offer a compliment when it is deserved is wrong. How many days go by when we fail to say words like these that can do such great good?

And let's not forget the words we speak to God and the words we speak about God. Not only do we sin when we curse or swear, but we also sin when we fail to pray or when we fail to give thanks and praise to God.

Is it safe to say that our tongues get us into lots of trouble? Would you agree that we sin daily by what we say and by what we fail to say? So what should we do?

Remember what Jesus said to the disciples just after Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah. We heard those words in the Bible reading today. He told them that he must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Jesus did that so that Peter and the rest of the disciples and you and me could be forgiven. When we sin, God can and will forgive us because of what Jesus did.

God does not take our sins lightly, and neither should we. God does not ignore our sins, rather, God confronts them with the cross of Jesus, the Messiah, and forgives them. And God does that, not just to get us off the hook - God forgives our sins so that we might turn away from our sins.

So what should we do about the sins of our tongues? Remember Jesus. Confess our sins. Receive with deep gratitude the forgiveness of God. Then strive to control our tongues by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The people around us need good words from us - the best words we can offer. Our families need our best words. Our friends and neighbors and co-workers need our best words. And the people in our church need our best words.

Words are powerful. They are very powerful. Let's be very careful with our words and be sure to use our words for good and not for evil.