

Ken Wratten at St. Luke's  
 September 16, 2018; 17 Pentecost; Proper 19  
 James 3:1-12

The book of James has something important to say about our tongue;

(NIV) “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. <sup>6</sup> The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire.” Right now we know a lot about the uncontrolled nature of fires, don’t we? From the CAL FIRE website last night: 20 active fires right now.

We adults are **really lucky** that when we grew older, **we outgrew this problem** of starting forest fires with our tongues. It is only an issue with children, right? Of course **we actually learn over time to do it even better**; to be passive aggressive, or to decide something is a ‘white lie’ instead of a real lie. Remember the saying: “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words... will never hurt me.” Of course this is not true at all. Words can hurt a lot.

EXAMPLE: You’re fat; you’re skin and bones; I don’t like you anymore; you’re ugly; I’m going to spend time today with my BEST friend (which you are not).

But there are words that hurt **even when we want to help**.

My wife Ruth was diagnosed with breast cancer just 6 months after we arrived at my first parish after graduation from seminary. After x-rays, CT-scans, ultra sounds, and MRIs, there were biopsies; and then waiting for the diagnostic results. Then three surgeries, and chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Shortly after going through all of these things, Ruth shared with more and more people that she was a breast cancer survivor. One person said, “My cousin had the same thing. She died.” Another person said, “You are wearing the wrong color; it is the color of death; you shouldn’t wear that color.”

A friend of mine had his annual physical. His PSA was high. After x-rays and CT-scan, it was decided to take a biopsy and a bone scan, to make sure any cancer would not have spread. As this he was waiting to get the results, praying, losing sleep, and waiting, he shared with someone what was happening. The friend started telling him that he should take certain vitamins, and certain supplements, and that would remove any cancer. My friend said, “Please stop right now. This is not helping me. Please stop.”

A friend’s mother passed away. After a few months, my friend kept experiencing waves of memories of her mother that would bring her to tears, and then to

sobbing, because she missed her mother so much. Someone said to her, “You should be over crying by now. You need to get on with your life.”

More sayings to avoid: You must be strong for your children.

It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

It’s a blessing.

I know just how you feel.

Rather than bringing comfort or support, these responses bring fear, and questioning; and they disregard that each person’s situation is unique, and there is no ‘pat’ answer that will take away our pain or fear.

**Ephesians 4:29** Paul said, “Let everything you say be kind and helpful, so that your words will be **an encouragement** to those who hear them.” He is saying that being Christian means that our words need to be carefully chosen to encourage people; even people we disagree with, or don’t like, or who have hurt us with their words. We need to remind ourselves in all those times that God expects us to be an encouragement through our words and our works.

That takes being careful and thoughtful about what we say; and it typically means saying less rather than more.

- I am very sorry.
- I really care about you, and am praying for you.
- Can I help you with a ride, or a visit, or be with you for a cup of coffee?
- Don’t ask: just do something-send flowers, send text of a burning candle, meet, light a votive, pray together.

**Being Christian isn’t only about believing in our heart that Jesus is God’s son,** and that God loves us. Being Christian is **also about our behavior**. And James reminds us that a very important piece of our faith-driven behavior is how we use our tongue (and email, and FB posts, and text messages). When you talk with kindness and caring you are acting like Christ; being Christ-like - which is our goal as Christians.

May God always help us use a kind and encouraging tongue; one that never starts fires. Amen.