

Out of the Mouth

Text: Proverbs 10:17-21; Matthew 15:10-20

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 7, 2021

In the book of Galatians, Paul mentions nine traits that mark the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit in a person's life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those virtues are not automatic downloads at our baptism; they are seeds that we have to nurture and grow over a lifetime. I have no idea whether Paul intended his list to have any kind of order, but I do think that the first and last of them are fitting bookends to the list and that's where I want to focus today.

Love comes first. The Bible tells us that love isn't just what God does; it's who and what God is. Love is the fertile soil in which the fruit of the Spirit grows. None of the fruit on Paul's list will manifest in our lives without it. And the backstop on the other end is self-control, sometimes translated as "temperance," which is simply the ability to do and say only the things we *want* to do or say. Paul admits his own struggle with this in Romans 7:15 when he says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." We've all been there.

By itself, self-control is neutral, since what we want to do or say may just as easily be cruel or self-serving as it might be kind and generous. There's a reason why villains are often described as "cold and calculating." Their evil is carefully controlled to achieve maximum effect, often plotted over years of discipline and training. Self-control can be put to honorable or dishonorable ends. And that's why I think it comes last on Paul's list. The ability to temper our passions and act in accordance with our values is necessary to every other virtue Paul lists. But he wants to be sure we know which values represent the God revealed to us in Jesus so we don't end up training ourselves for the wrong things.

Even though it's listed last, I want to focus on self-control now because it's a huge topic and will no doubt come up when we talk about everything else. But I also want to narrow the focus this week to what I believe is the most important part of ourselves to master, which is our speech. The book of James tells us in chapter 3 verse 2 that "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle." In other words, James believes our speech is the single most important tool in determining behavior. Control your speech and you control your whole body.

Now mix in Matthew 15:18, where Jesus says "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart" and you have the biblical process laid out. All of our actions, helpful or hurtful, start in our hearts—at our emotional core. From there, the things in our heart find their way into our speech; and once they have been spoken and let loose in the world, they grow in power—magnified every time the speech is repeated until, eventually, they are embodied in action. You also heard that message in the verses from Proverbs 10 that were read earlier. It's all the biblical version of "Loose lips sink ships."

But those are all small segments of a very large set of texts in the Bible. Are there larger biblical themes that would support that interpretation? Glad you asked. I would like to call to the stand the first chapter of Genesis and the first chapter of John's gospel. The very first story we get in the Bible is God literally speaking the world into existence. "God said...and there was," day after day until

creation is complete. God does nothing else but speak and everything that is comes into being. Jumping to the New Testament, the first chapter of John identifies Jesus as the eternal, creative Word of God that then became flesh and lived among us.

I've said before that I make a distinction between facts and truth when I read the Bible. I can't tell you whether those passages from Genesis and John are factual or not. But I can tell you that both of them strike me as deeply true; because I've now spent 61 years watching things that started as speech turn into physical realities. I have watched words become flesh in individuals, churches, communities, and nations and have seen worlds both created and dismantled through powerful stories.

Any therapist can tell you that the beginning of turning failure into success is learning to monitor and then shift the way we talk to ourselves, even if just in our own heads. And anyone working for social justice can tell you that until you have the language to name a problem, it can't be addressed. If you can't name it, you can't report it, study it, or make laws about it. Our speech and the way we use it has a profound impact on our emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and even our physical health. It's not that words change reality, at least not directly. Words change our *perceptions* of reality. But since we take action based on our perception of what is going on and our actions are manifest in the real world, it's not a stretch to say that words can change the world—for good or for ill.

There is a very real, permanent fence going up around our nation's capital right now because so many people had the *perception* that the election was illegitimate that they stormed the building and killed people, trying to overturn the results. That perception came about through words that were easily proven lies—words that were tested over a hundred times in court, where no evidence was presented or even claimed, and that were dismissed by judges from across the political spectrum as untrue. The perception didn't and couldn't change the reality of a fairly-decided election. But the perception created by those words *has* made real changes in the world. Five people died and 140 police officers were injured because of that perception.

On the positive end of the ledger is one of many fascinating studies conducted by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer and described in her book *Counter Clockwise*. Dr. Langer noticed a flaw in surveys about how much exercise people get in the United States, noting that the surveys focused only on exercise that happened in a person's free time. Why that focus? Because the surveys were created by white collar workers whose jobs didn't involve much physical labor. Their experience of exercise was that you had to do it outside of work and so they put that experience into the words of a survey. They then amplified the published results to show which demographics in the United States got enough exercise and which did not.

But that interpretation of the word "exercise" skewed the results so that those who toiled long hours in physical labor—whether paid or unpaid—were reported as not getting enough "exercise." They got no credit for that, and they were the least likely group to have extra time or energy to go for a run; money for a gym membership or a bike. So those people scored low on how much "exercise" they were getting. Because that work is most frequently done by women and people of color, the survey results printed in newspapers and journals fed the narrative that some groups were lazy, not health-conscious, and all the rest.

Dr. Langer wondered what might happen if she changed the definition of exercise. Her 2007 study focused on female hotel room attendants; whose daily work easily met the surgeon general's requirements for a healthy lifestyle but who were—as a group—in exceedingly poor health. She wondered if just a change in the way the word “exercise” was perceived could possibly make a difference.

After confirming that the majority of the women did not view their work as exercise, the women were informed, correctly, that their job as hotel room attendants satisfied the CDC's recommendation for an active lifestyle. There was a control group that didn't get that information. Nothing else changed.

What happened? In four weeks, the women who were told they were actually getting the recommended amount of exercise on the job had lost an average of two pounds and a significant percentage of body fat. They had an increase in body water percentage and a blood pressure drop of 10 points systolic and 5 points diastolic. Interestingly, they also reported a *decrease* in physical activity *outside* of work. How about the control group who just went on thinking they didn't exercise enough? They actually gained both weight and body fat during that same four-week period. Their work didn't change a bit. But words that acknowledged their work as exercise changed their *perception* of their work, which resulted in actual physiological changes to their bodies. What was spoken came into being. The word became flesh.

So it seems to me that on both the negative and the positive sides of the equation, the wisdom of the Bible holds up in real life: Our hearts are filled by our own lived experiences, some of which we can control, some of which we can't. We try to give meaning to those experiences through words—both written and spoken—which moves them from our hearts out into the world. And once we do that, the toothpaste is out of the tube. They take on a life of their own for good or for ill. We have created something in the world; and, if it is able to build enough momentum, it will alter behavior, and even health outcomes. Out of the heart the mouth speaks and those words will become flesh and dwell among us. If it grows too strong, no “I was only joking” will stop it.

But I also want to point out that keeping our words in check doesn't mean just not speaking. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* a couple of weeks ago, remaining silent in the face of injustice can cut deeper than the injustice itself. Taming the tongue, as James puts it, is not about speaking or not speaking. It's about recognizing the power of speech to create embodied action and knowing both when and how to say what needs to be said. In Ephesians 4:15, Paul uses the phrase “speaking the truth in love,” which, to me, is the ballgame. That's the goal. It's not truth OR love that we need to shape our words. It's truth AND love together. That brings the two ends of Paul's list together and makes embodying all of the virtues in-between them much easier.

Once the massive power of speech sinks in—once we learn that being careless with our speech can have the same consequences as being careless with a gun—we can summon the discipline necessary to choose our words with care. We're not going to do the work necessary to gain self-control—over our speech or anything else—until we understand that with it comes the power not just to make our own lives more fulfilling but to literally change the world. It's not just that we can help prevent bad things from happening, we can be a part of making good things happen.

We talk about wanting to be the change we want to see in the world. Well, we can't "be the change" until we learn to master ourselves, and that self-mastery—taking charge of our own lives and being determined to live out our values—begins right here in the pie hole. We can't control what enters the heart. Everything we experience in life goes in there. The first place we have the opportunity to exercise self-control is with our tongues. If we can learn when silence is golden and when silence is complicity; if we can learn how to speak the truth with humility and love; our words will become flesh and finally have the chance to be the change we want to see in the world. Amen.