

CHRISTIAN CIVILITY

Text: James 3:7-10 (Peterson) This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue – it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

I am not sure how sharp my mind is, but I am very sure how sharp my tongue is. It has been honed over the years with public debates and private lashings. Innumerable faculty meetings, conferences and consultancies have put a mean edge to my tongue. My constant prayer, especially from the pulpit, is God let me think before I speak and speak with moderation and with love in my heart. Fortunately, for all of us, She usually answers my prayer.

The scarcest commodity in today's world is not gold, but quiet. We live in a world of shout. Sweet nothings are not whispered in one's ear, they are shouted through ear-buds. The decibel level of modern life is such that noise induced hearing loss is a major medical problem of the middle aged. Discussion has become the exchange of fifty-word insults and debate is left to competing talking heads who scream over one another in the eternal quest for more face-time on television.

The church has a long history of using sharp tongues. Even in today's Gospel, Jesus, annoyed with Peter, says to him "Get behind me, Satan!" That is a pretty sharp tongue coming from the Prince of Peace! Can you imagine what the sermons must have sounded like when colonial revolutionaries wanted to break with the King of England, who, after-all, was the head of the Church. Judging by the number of colonists who packed their bags for Canada, individual parishes must have had some sharp tongues, indeed.

Fast forward from the Revolutionary to the Civil War period. Sharp tongues must have been frequently used in support of that "peculiar institution." It does not take a life or death issue to bring out the sword tongues of the righteous. North and South tongues were unleashed with a passion over replacing the 1928 Book of Common Prayer with the 1979 revision. Parishes were also riven with dissension over the issue of the ordination of women. Reading through some of the sermons of the time, one suspects that "God born of woman" was rejected by many male clergy who, I suspect, thought that baby Jesus was discovered under a cabbage leaf, properly vested, of course.

In more recent years the issue of gender identification generated such sharp-tongued battles that some parishes took refuge by changing their membership to African dioceses. I was given a proper perspective on all of these wars of self-righteousness a few years ago in Kaifeng, China where I was teaching. I walked by a very large Christian Church whose steps were being swept by a middle-aged lady, and, after finding out that she could speak English, I asked her what denomination the church was. "Denomination? Here we only preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Her reply is still a good lesson for us all. Sharp tongues are rarely needed if you unite on the essentials – such as "Jesus Christ and Him crucified!"

This is all well and good for Christians within the church. But, what is the Christian to do in that much smaller world, called everyday life? One response is isolation – a kind of retreat from civil life entirely. This has a long and honorable tradition in the Church. Even Jesus felt the need to escape to

the desert or to the sea in order to find a quiet place to pray and meditate. Many religious orders remove their members from everyday life and concerns so that they might spend more of their time in worship and in Godly service. That has not been the customary view of the Episcopal church which generally charges its' members with the need to vigorously participate in civic life. Episcopalians have a long history of civic participation, both in the political arena and in public service.

For most of us, the question is not are we going to participate, but how are we going to participate and remain civil in our pursuit of civic duty. There is a way to accomplish this: We Christians may act as civil leaven for the bread of political life. It is an interesting notion: Christians as the yeast of political action. By obeying James's instruction to bridle our tongues, we could set an interesting example for those engaged in political dialogue. Just as yeast makes the bread rise, so the civility of Christians makes the quality of political discourse rise. I realize that many a heated political debate has been ruined because someone insisted on using real data in an argument, but it does suggest that if we were slower to express opinions and faster to find hard data, our tongues would not have to be quite so sharp. A sharper mind would be a worthy replacement for a sharp tongue.

Yeast is the smallest ingredient to go into the making of bread, but it has the largest effect. So Christian civility, done quietly and individually, might have a large effect on the body politic. Perhaps James had this in mind when he said: "You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor." AMEN

For Edna & Port Lavaca

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