

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Metatalk"  
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Proper 19

Almost everything that we can imagine or that we can think about involves words, or talk. We can see pictures, and we have taken many in our travels from California to Bonavista, and many know the proverb that a picture is worth a thousand words. This may be true, but it still requires words to be able to process what is actually going on in the picture.

Our brains and our lives are structured by narrative, by stories and story lines which are made up of words and talk. So the only way that we can put understanding to what we experience is by way of words and talk. Of course we experience many emotions and many occasions where we are at a loss for words or talk, but even when we say we are at a loss for words, it means we don't understand what we are experiencing. It often means we are confused.

So we talk, whether to a friend or to a family member, or to a stranger or a colleague. We talk. And through our talking with someone else, we frame what our reality, what we are experiencing, looks like. We also do this when we read fiction or non-fiction, and when we experience audio-visual input such as video, radio, computer games and simulations and art of all kinds.

Even those who cannot talk find ways to communicate in non-verbal language and in signs and symbols of all kinds. So even these have a way of speaking and communicating. Communication is the backbone of our human existence.

To say that we all have much to learn about communicating with each other is to say something obvious. Perhaps it is even as obvious as saying that we need words and talk to understand what we are going through.

All of this is to say that the main two relationships in life depend heavily on talk. Those two relationships are the divine/human relationship and the human/human relationship. God speaks to us through creation. God speaks to us through other human beings. God speaks to us uniquely through the revelation given to us in Scripture.

That's why we respect the Scriptures as the Word of God. That's in part why we rise at the beginning of the service as the Scriptures are brought into this place we call a Sanctuary, which is set apart to God. It is because we want to hear what God has to say to us. For if we don't really care what God thinks about our lives or if we don't really know if God is there or if God exists, then we aren't going to have much interest in what goes on here in this building or any other church on a Sunday morning, or any other time for that matter.

But if we are keenly interested in our relationship with God, and growing in that relationship, then we will be keenly interested in what God has to say to us about our lives, about our identity, about our behaviour, about our day to day working out of living with other flawed human beings. These things are foundational to what we experience on Sunday morning.

This is the picture of Wisdom as a woman calling out to us in the street. She is asking us to consider God's ways and will, and acknowledge our need of knowing and experiencing something more than we can figure out on our own. She says that we ignore what God is telling us at our own peril. She says that we better smarten up and listen, otherwise when calamity hits, such as the sudden loss of our own health or life or the life of someone close to us, we will be on our own, just as we have chosen to be, when we ignore God.

Why hate knowledge and shun being in right relationship with God, when you can experience the security and peace of knowing and loving God without fear and dread of disaster? That's the paradox: the fear of the Lord, being in right relationship to God where we say "yes" to God's ways and will delivers us from many levels of fear and angst which come from our natural human concerns.

So the Scriptures bring us back to basics. Basics are such things as wisdom and life-giving speech. Wisdom is saying "yes" to God, giving one's life to Jesus even as we give our lives to our schooling and our profession or occupation. It is a conscious decision and requires all of our resources, not just an hour or so on Sunday morning.

It also causes us to think again about the way we talk to each other. The Bible in James teaches us that not many of us should become teachers. The primary concern here is about spiritual teaching, but I believe it applies to everyone who teaches, whether in schools, universities, companies or homes. We will all be held accountable by God for how we shape the lives given over to our care as teachers. Teaching is an awesome gift and a serious responsibility.

James reflects on the fact that teaching involves the use of words and talk. It means shaping others' reality and the way they relate to both God and other human beings. James talks about how our talk reflects our flaws. He notes that if we could speak perfectly, we would be perfect. And he is not speaking about our accent, or grammar, but the content and intent of what we say. James says that we all fail in speaking to others the way we should. We are far from perfect. We all make mistakes. We speak factual errors, called lies. We speak intonational errors, revealing disrespect and impatience, for example.

James uses word pictures to help us understanding how words and talk, how our tongues effect God and others. He uses pictures of the bit in a horse's mouth and how it is used to direct the horse to go in the way the rider intends. But then he suggests that the horse is not quite broken yet and so he goes here and there and wherever the horse wants, regardless of the danger to the rider.

Then James talks about ships and how large they are. Have you had a chance to go to the harbour here in St. John's when a cruise ship has docked? The ship is immense, it fills a whole block and looks like the size of one of the seven story parkades down there on Harbour Drive. But those large ships with five or eight or ten stories of decks still are directed by one smaller piece of equipment, which is hidden under the water, just like your tongue is hidden in your mouth (at least most of the time, I hope). And if your speech is off or hurtful or destructive, then it's like the great big shiny ship with a rudder that doesn't work properly. And when the ship runs aground, or hits an iceberg, it doesn't matter how good it looks, or how amazing the first class cabins were. It is disaster. The Titanic comes to mind, doesn't it, since we live closest to where it went down.

Another picture James uses in talking about the misuse of words and talk in destroying others, in lying, in misleading and in disrespecting is that of a small spark. He talks about how a small spark, one match, one lighter, one cigarette can cause a horrendous forest fire. This is what happened in 2003 when we lived in the Okanagan in BC, and it has happened this last summer in the Okanagan as well. Back in 2003, one man carelessly through a cigarette on the side of the road, and several communities lost homes, much forest was destroyed. Even our small community of Armstrong was on one hour evacuation alert. If you had one hour to leave your home, and you only had your vehicle or vehicles to put your stuff in, what would you take?

We took a few boxes of photos and some camping equipment and put them in the van. In the small car, I put the church ledgers with baptisms, weddings, funerals and the Minutes of Session and the Board in the trunk of the car. We were there in the church building on a Sunday morning in a surreal worship service with only a little smaller crowd than usual. I thought we wouldn't have anyone come, but people came as usual. But nothing was "as usual" in that service. All of us had a very sharp focus and plan for what to do if they told we had to get out. It puts your life and possessions back in God's hands in a very tangible way.

So the tongue can be like a careless cigarette thrown with some defamatory words, with some negative comments about someone that does not need the forest fire in their lives that might be started by your careless, negative comment. All of us do this to some degree. I doubt anyone here believes they never say a crooked word about anyone. James says that we can use our words and talk to build others up or tear them down. Our words can be either like life giving fresh water or like poison. We have choices to make. Will we build one another up? Will we build the church up? Or will throw cigarettes here and there and see what happens?

James is talking to us about how we talk. Talking about talking is metatalk which is the title of this talk. He says human beings have learned to tame just about every animal we have ever met. But we have never learned how to tame our tongues. And it is true.

So where do we go from here? We need to agree with God, give ourselves this day again to God. And we need to ask God who we should go to, to make things right. We need to ask forgiveness of those whom we have

tongue lashed, those we have hurt with our words and talk. It doesn't matter if it is someone you have known for decades or someone you have just met. We need to use our words for good, in relationship to God and relationship to one another.

And briefly on another subject, it's also good to acknowledge how wonderful the grandparent/grandchild relationship is. My relationship with my grandmother was hugely supportive to me in my formative years. We had a special Friday night time, where we cookies and grape juice, we watched a little TV like Wild Wild West or Hogan's Heroes and we played some cards. Every good relationship is a treasure. I hope you can invest in a wonderful one with your grandchildren. And we'll do our best here to support that relationship

Let us pray.