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 Proper 19 B: James 3:1-12
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Recombobulation

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue-- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

I have a new favorite word. The word is “recombobulation.” As in Recombobulation Area. In the airport in Milwaukee, there is a large sign hanging above the area on the other side of security screening. It says, Recombobulation Area.¹ There are a few benches, places to sit and collect yourself after the discombobulation of going through security. If you’ve flown in the past few years, you know the drill. Take your laptop out of its

case, take out your Ziploc bag of liquids and gels in 3 ounces or less containers, take off your sweater and your shoes, and put all these pieces of your life into those grey plastic bins. Push your grey plastic bins onto the belt, go through the metal detector, then stand barefoot waiting for your belongings to come out the other side. Wonder if it's your bag that's holding up the line. Wonder if you left a bottle of water in your bag, if you accidentally brought a pair of scissors, a tube of toothpaste, a knitting needle. Wait until you can grab your things from the bins before more bins and anxious people pile up behind you. The experience can be discombobulating, to say the least. But in Milwaukee's airport, you look up and see a sign and a place to go get recombobulated. The word "recombobulation" isn't actually in the dictionary -- yet. The security screeners in Milwaukee put it up as kind of a joke, a friendly gesture to acknowledge that they know what the security screening process can feel like.

I like the word "recombobulation" because I think it works outside the airport too. We all need recombobulation areas, places to go where we can sit, get our bearings, see if we have what we need, after death, after sadness, bad news, a stressful day. A place to get reoriented for the next part of our journey. I think that one of the things church is, is a recombobulation area. If we take the time, we get the pieces of our lives back, purified, a chance to rest, reorient, think about where we're heading, note that we are not travelling alone. A kind word, a smile, some patience, some humor, and some help make the journey easier for everyone.

I'm talking about my new favorite word this morning because our second reading, from James is about the power of words, the power of our speech, our tongue. "From the same mouth," writes James, "come blessing and cursing." James relates the tongue to the rudder of a ship: so small, yet directing the course of the whole vessel. How will we use our tongues, our words? To bless? To curse?

The Letter of James is about Christian practices – the ways we live our faith, put our faith into action. James writes, "Be doers of the word, not hearers only." So today, we take the time to think about the power of our words and invite you to put into practice some wisdom about words that helps us in our Christian journey. I'm going to offer three things to do in response to today's epistle lesson.

Our words have power to move us, for good or for ill. They can recombobulate us, or discombobulate us. Build up or tear down. Make us smile, weep with joy or sadness, give us hope, make us fearful.

In 2008 the British Council conducted a poll.ⁱⁱ Forty thousand people living in non-English speaking countries and people learning English identified what they considered to be the most beautiful words in the English language. Here are the top ten: Mother, Passion, Smile, Love, Eternity, Fantastic, Destiny, Freedom, Liberty, Tranquility. Numbers 11 and 12 are pretty nice too: Peace and Blossom. In case you're wondering, Shipshape made the list at number 65 and Hippopotamus at 52.

Even a *list* of words brings images, memories, and ideas to mind. So, imagine – every day we have the opportunity to send messages, to offer hope, to build up, to give through something as simple as the words we say. David Staal has written a book called, *Words Kids Need to Hear*.ⁱⁱⁱ Here's his list: I believe in you. You can count on me. I treasure you. I'm sorry, please forgive me. Because (as part of a statement, not as a complete statement). No. I love you. It's actually a good list for anyone in a relationship with anyone else.

So here's the first practice to try: say something. Use your power of speech for good. To build up. To offer hope. Many of you, I know, are already very good at this. I've been on the receiving end of many, many kind words and encouraging messages while facing the loss of my father. Thank you. It makes a difference. What if the only words we spoke or wrote to another were words we truly offer as a gift, words we intend to have only a positive outcome? Marilyn Chandler McEntyre writes, "to 'converse' originally meant to live among or together . . . to foster community, to commune with . . . Conversation is an exchange of gifts. Native American tribal wisdom teaches that when you encounter a person on your life path, you must seek to find out what gifts you have for one another so that you may exchange them before going your separate ways . . . We come into one another's presence bearing whatever harvest of experience the day has offered, and we foster relationship by making a gift of what we have received."^{iv} We have a tremendous power, as James says, to use our speech to praise God and bless one another.

So -- Practice 1: Say something. Say something kind. Say something gracious. Say something beautiful. Who needs to hear something good from

you? Who needs some encouragement that you have within your power, simply by having a voice and a tongue, a pen and some paper, text messaging, anything, to give?

Here's practice 2: say nothing. Our mouths do not come with a backspace key. Words spoken in anger, words spoken to hurt, words spoken thoughtlessly, or to build oneself up at the expense of another, words spoken to curse or belittle – don't say them. James writes, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire." A mother made this comment to her adult daughter, "My dear, you've missed so many opportunities to say nothing."^v There are times we need to listen, more than we need to talk. There are times when words cannot express what our hearts feel, and our presence is the best gift we can offer. Sometimes, say nothing.

Practice 3: Commit some beautiful words to memory. Memorize some good words. Put something in your mind that can help shape your heart, shape your future, accompany you, help you get recombobulated. Memorizing words has gotten a bad rap lately, but think of all the words that are in our heads that others worked really hard to put there: advertizing jingles, things our parents always said. As one saint said, What's in our head shapes what's in our hearts. This week, try it: memorize a verse from scripture or a prayer. Just one. Find some words that can keep you company this week, that will bless you or be a blessing to others.

An experience that has touched me deeply in ministry has been to do services at nursing homes. Sometimes people have such struggles, are so disconnected with what is going on around them, so unable to communicate. But then, we will sing a favorite hymn, and all the words come flooding back. We say the Lord's Prayer, and suddenly speech is clear and strong. We say the 23rd Psalm, and words flow, reconnecting the person with the love that someone taught them is the truest, most eternal thing. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . ." A statement. A promise. Words of blessing. Words someone may be longing to hear.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." This is how the Gospel of John begins and describes Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Christ the Word incarnate came to give us life and freedom, so that our words might participate in God's ongoing creation in the world, bringing light into darkness, bringing hope, healing, joy.

Say something. Say nothing. Give yourself the gift of words to hold in your mind and shape your heart. May God bless our words.

Amen.

ⁱ See a picture and read a news story about Mitchell Field's Recombobulation Area at <http://www.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/29452504.html>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.britishcouncil.org/home-70-beautiful-words.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Staal, *Words Kids Need to Hear to help them be who God made them to be* (Zondervan, 2008).

^{iv} Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Eerdmans, 2009), 89, 95.

^v Chandler McEntyre, 50.