

May the Mouthguard Be with You
Pentecost 14, Year B
Ps 19 (Ps141), James 3:2-12, Mk 8:27-38
Rev. Stephanie Bekhor
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Wouldn't it be helpful if, when God created us, God installed "door" in front of our lips? Then we might not put our foot in our mouth.

Today's psalmist must have put his foot in his mouth and said something he regretted, for he tells God to "come *quickly*" and to "set a *guard* over [his] mouth" to "*keep watch* over the door of [his] lips" (141:1, 3).

I suppose it wouldn't be enough simply to install a door; presumably, we could open and close it as we wished. The psalmist is right; we need a mouth guard.

The Bible's most practical book, the Book of James, says that though "the tongue is [only] a small member [of the body]...[it] is a fire" (3:6). James, too, said and heard some things he wished he hadn't, for he calls the tongue a "restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8).

The writer of Proverbs 26 is no less scathing: "Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are smooth lips with an evil heart" (:23).

Our words have great power; consider the example of the American who, in a video clip posted on the internet, mocked the founder of Islam and provoked an unprecedented wave of anti-American violence "in more than twenty nations, stretching from western Africa to Indonesia and from London to Somalia." Protestors used his message as a springboard for hate; they "stormed and scorched U.S. embassies in Tunisia and Sudan...and set a fast-food restaurant ablaze in Lebanon" (Youseff, Nancy A. *Detroit Free Press* 15 September 2012).

If we're tempted to think we in America are beyond such extremism, consider the Salem Witch Trials in colonial Massachusetts, in which hundreds of women were falsely accused of witchcraft and put to death.

If we're tempted to dismiss the trials as distant history, consider the McCarthyism of the 1950s; large numbers of men and women were accused of being Communist and Soviet spies and sympathizers inside the United States" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_McCarthy). While some men and women *were* spies, the vast majority was not, yet they were falsely accused and imprisoned and their character and patriotism publically attacked.

“The tongue is a fire”, James writes; “no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:6, 8).

On a smaller, but no less deadly, scale consider how people tear each other down with our everyday speech.

The author of Proverbs sardonically and succinctly writes that one who deceives a neighbor and says, “I’m only joking”, is “like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows” (26:18). We’ve all heard people say, “I am only joking!” to excuse an underhanded comment that wasn’t a joke at all.

“For lack of wood,” Proverbs continues, “the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases....The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels”—it’s fun to gossip, isn’t it?—“[but these words] go down into the inner parts of the body” (26:20, 22).

That’s the problem, isn’t it? Hateful or underhanded comments, gossip and rudeness “go down into [our] *inner parts*” and get lodged there. Who among us doesn’t live with the hurtful comments someone has said to or about us?

When I was in middle school—ah, middle school, that hotbed of insecurity—a boy yelled out from across the crowded hall, “Look at her hair!” In horror, I realized he was pointing at me, and I carry his insult with me, judging my hair unruly and “too curly.”

No less hurtful, if not more so, are the underhanded comments that appear to be compliments: “*For a woman*, you’re a good driver.” “Wow, your husband even changes diapers!” How insulting to both women and men.

But the words don’t have to be outwardly hateful or underhanded; we might say something good but at the wrong time or in the wrong way.

Today’s gospel reading provides an example: Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do the people say I am?” and they reply: John the Baptizer, Elijah, one of the prophets. He then asks them, “And you—what are you saying about me? Who am I?” to which Peter quickly responds: “You are the Christ, the Messiah.” Peter has spoken well, from the heart, but Jesus warns him to keep it quiet, not to breathe a word of it to anyone (Mark 8:27b-29).

This is good news. Why put on the Mouthguard?

Jesus gives a reason: “It is necessary that the Son of Man suffer, be tried and found guilty, killed, and rise again.” It’s not time yet; just wait.

But Peter, in his excitement and earnestness, grabs him in protest, and Jesus, turning and seeing his disciples wondering what to believe, confronts Peter. “Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.”

Peter is not bad; Peter is not Satan; he’s just chomping at the bit, ready for action, ready to get things moving, but the timing’s not right. As we see in the gospel passage, even good words can be uncalled for if delivered at the wrong time and in the wrong way. As the author of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak” (3:7).

The scriptures teach us that words aren’t the end-all-be-all; often, the best words are no words at all. The psalmist draws our attention to God’s world—the earth and skies and seas—and how they proclaim God’s glory simply by being themselves: “There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Psalm 19:1-4).

Modern-day teachers also remind us that our words aren’t our only, or even our most powerful, form of speech. Rachel Macy Stafford, author and Special Education teacher, learned this fact from her father, a man who, though he “wasn't perfect—he lost his temper sometimes, he worked too much, he experienced periods of depression—even through the rough patches, always listened to [her].”

Her father, it turns out, had a mouthguard, and he knew how to use it.

“Having a parent who listens,” writes Stafford, “creates a child who believes he or she has a voice that matters in this world. When you believe your voice matters, you have the strength to say, “Let me out of the car.” You have the courage to say *no* to harmful substances... When you believe your voice matters, you have the confidence to stick up for someone who is being mistreated. You have the ability to admit you made a mistake and say you'll try to do better next time.”

What we say powerfully impacts others; so, too, does what we *don't* say; holding our tongue is a good course of action, not simply because we too often speak before we think and stick our foot in our mouth, but because, by holding our tongue, our ears and eyes also a chance at bat:

Look into [another’s] eyes, Stafford suggests, and “you are indicating that you value their thoughts.”

Hold your tongue, and you give others time and space “to put their thoughts into words” and “to share what's on their hearts.”

When the time to speak comes, “pause...especially when troubling information is shared...and try this response: ‘Thank you for trusting me with this. You did the right thing

by telling me.’ No matter how angry you are, or how much you want to [yell], it can take just one volatile outburst to shut down future communications... ‘Thank you for trusting me with this’ opens up both the discussion at hand and the discussions of the future. If you want [someone] to confide in [you] when they are scared, hurt, or worried, then muster all the grace you have and speak calmly in troubling times.”ⁱ

James makes sure to remind us that “all of us make *many* mistakes” and that no one among us is “perfect in speaking” (3:2). If the best we can do, then, is to speak *well*, then the key, it seems, is to speak more with our eyes, ears, and heart than with our lips.

We want keep the door shut when we feel a hateful or rude comment making its way into our mouths; and, we want to clean up our “verbal mess” when the door swings open.

One of my spiritual disciplines is to carefully guard my speech when talking on the phone to customer service reps whether with insurance agents or Joybird Furniture salespersons, who assure me the sofa we ordered five months ago, is “on its way.” Steve playfully remarked: “they’re giving you no joy, just the bird.”

From the same mouth, James tells us, come blessing and cursing. “My brothers and sisters,” he calls us, “this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?” (3:10-11).

In this we see that it’s not just about putting a door in front of our lips or telling God, like the Psalmist, to be our mouthguard; we need a fresh spring deep in our “inner parts” that bubbles up and spews forth the Living Word. Or to use Proverbs’ other metaphor, we must have roots deep in our inner parts that sprout forth fresh, healthy fruit.

The spring and the roots are Jesus and his Spirit, who guides us. We cultivate him deep within us by worship, meditation, prayer, fellowship with believers and service in his name. If we don’t tend to our relationship with him, what comes out of us will not be *of* him; and we Christians want what comes from us—from our eyes and ears and lips and hearts—to be *of* him.

A final thought before I close: shutting the door to hateful or rude speech isn’t the same as shutting the door to *difficult* speech. Oftentimes, we need to speak up, but we do it in the Spirit of Christ, through love and directness, without manipulation or guilt. Use as a guide the psalmist’s plea to God: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (19:14). If the words are acceptable to God, they’ll be appropriate for others, even if difficult and uncomfortable. Even if the roil the waters.

ⁱ Stafford, Rachel Macy. “The Single Most Important Parenting Action We Can Take Today.” *Huffington Post*. 8 September 2015.