

<sup>3</sup> If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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! <sup>6</sup> 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.... <sup>8</sup> but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so...

Last Sunday I spoke of the wonder of remembrance. Last week we heard about the blessing that would follow the act of God remembering things. We have been given this ability so that we grow and learn, and become better versions of what God intends for us to be. I remember something from many years ago, probably before our daughter was even born. It was a sermon from a great man, probably the most meaningful mentor in my life, Rev. Dr. Thomas Dipko. While a group of clergy were on a retreat, he preached a number of times. And he said something like this: He was speaking about Peter's shame at being with Jesus after he had betrayed him 3 times. Peter did this with his mouth. We do very important things with our mouths. Probably the two most important are EATING, and SPEAKING. We are blessed people, so we don't really need to say much today about eating, because we are blessed to eat every day. But let's focus on that other experience.

So, back to Peter and his shame after Jesus had been raised from death. According to John 21, Jesus is with the men on a shore after they have returned to fishing, and there is a fire, and they are

probably cooking some fish, which is great. But fires always have one bad drawback. You get a good spot, not far from the fire, but up wind as we would say. You are sitting there enjoying that fire, but then the wind changes, and the smoke blows directly in your face and eyes and nose! For me, the worst part of that experience is having my eyes burn from the smoke. Well, Peter and the others are sitting around the fire, enjoying some Lake Erie Yellow Perch, and something else burns Peter's eyes. Just like the burning smoke that gets in our eyes, Jesus starts asking Peter a strange question. ***“Do you love me?”*** Jesus will ask this three times. And we think to ourselves *why is he asking that crazy question of Peter, and why does he do it three times?* And then Peter remembers, that Jesus had told him that he would deny Jesus three times. And then it hits him: his words of denial, from his mouth, against Jesus, now blow back into his face and eyes, burning his eyes just like the smoke from a fire.

Our words may not look like smoke that we can see with our eyes, but the words that we speak sometimes blow back into our own faces, and they hurt. Maybe those words did hurt someone else when they first came out. My mentor, Thom Dipko told us that night, *“Oh how our own words often rise up and blow back in our faces, burning our eyes like smoke.”*

We are now in the middle of Summer, with hot months of August and September still to come. There is no need for a long drawn out sermon today. But we can learn something that we can carry with us out of here today. Peggy Thomas our new main secretary found this great little graphic that is on the bulletin and on the screen. It simple says JAMES : A Manual for Maturity: Taming the Tongue. If I can make a personal plug here, I would

encourage you all, if you find the Bible to be difficult to understand ( because it is! ), if it is difficult but you would like to get into it, there is a solution. Turn toward the very back of the book, and you will find this little book that is called **“The Epistle of James.”** It is not long. And, even better, I would suggest that it might be the most accessible book in all of this library we call The Bible. When I was a senior in high school and started having stirrings in my heart towards God, I tried to read things. And the one that worked the best for me was this little book called James. We can understand this. Let’s go back and look at the words for today. We can all access this.

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Well, that is clear enough! There are tiny things in the world that are able to have great control over big things. A bit in a horse’s mouth, or a rudder on a ship. They are small. But they make big things happen. One little match can set a forest on fire. One little match. And James continues:

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I left some parts out here. But again, the words need no unpacking. Just the final 2 verses here are so powerful. We have this mouth, with which we can bless the name of God, but then turn right around and use the same mouth to curse other human beings who are made in the image of the God we just blessed. As James said it so long ago, “*my brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so...*” I think it is so good for all of us to just hear little phrases like these, again and again, so that we might remember, so that hopefully it starts to stick. James in fact is full of great little bits. I believe we have some here to put in our pockets and take home.

Let me close this by offering one more little bit from James, which is actually the first special verse that was imbedded in me as a senior in high school. From the ending of the first chapter of this little book, the writer makes a profound statement: “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*” 45 years later, I still love that one! Words of wisdom could sure help us in our strange times.

Let's be careful, and keep that smoke out of our eyes. AMEN.