

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 13, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

James 3:1-12

"Walking by Faith: Tripping Tongues"

Over the past few weeks, you've probably heard of and seen footage from the wildfires taking place over in southern California. I have never seen such wildfires myself, but some of the photos and footage presented in the media have offered striking images. One such picture showed a man in front of his home with night falling and the sky darkening – save for the orange-yellow light that looked like a crown on the crest of the ridge behind the house. Firefighters have been working tirelessly to control spreading flames, pouring mass quantities of water onto the wildfire to drown it out and extinguish it. Land which was once clothed by vegetation is now covered in soot and ash, with charred husks of trees poking up from the scorched landscape. And while I don't know how the wildfire began, and arson is suspected, I imagine that it didn't take much more than a small flame to set it off. The conditions were primed for wildfire: dry conditions with little rain made the national forest outside of Los Angeles a tinderbox, ready to burn to the ground.

Although James evokes this same imagery in our epistle text today, Pastor Meehan and I initially wondered if this would be the best text to preach on this weekend when we mark the beginning of a new educational year in the life of our congregation, Rally Day. After all, the very first verse is "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness"! (And thanks be to God for the teachers among us!) But there is something else that God is teaching us through James' letter, something that we must learn as we conclude this summer's "Walking by Faith" series: our tongues can trip us up. The tongue, tiny as it is in relation to the rest of the body, can be a source of stumbling. And why? The tongue is our instrument of speech; but all too often, it is also a tool of the devil, being "a fire, a world of unrighteousness" that burns us and the people around us. James isn't just talking about that part of the human body called the tongue, though. This message applies to so much more, encompassing the human forms of communication, be they spoken, written, signed, or sung. The tongue represents all these. Through language, the child of the tongue, we interact with others. Words influence – or "steer," to use James' imagery – our course in the world. But as fallen human beings, we constantly run the risk of tripping on our tongues instead of walking by faith. Today, let's consider three areas in which the tongue might cause us to stumble: **gossip**, **grumbling**, and **"grenades."**

So what is **gossip**? Rumor. Buzz. Scuttlebutt. Earl Wilson once sagely defined gossip as "Hearing something you like about someone you don't." I think we could amend that quote to include "something" as well as "someone." It's the stuff that people aren't supposed to know: juicy tidbits, dirty laundry, inside information. Gossip might be unsubstantiated ("Well, I heard that so-and-so..."), but it could be actual fact ("Did you know that Mr. X just got fired?"). Essentially, it's about communicating something – true or false – on the down-low. Have you ever been caught up in gossip? The temptation here can be a strong pull, either to hear the latest rumor *or* to divulge some tantalizing bit of data. We want to be in-the-know: we might thirst for the opportunity to have a leg up on our competition. We might thirst for the power that comes from possessing knowledge that others want. We might thirst for entertainment. But whatever our motivation for engaging in it, gossip only sets things on fire and trips people up, whether they're seventh graders or seventy-year-olds. Gossip can burn everything it touches.

As Christians, it's important to understand that the tongue can also set some low-grade fires. But a cook can tell you that even a low-grade fire can still cook a goose if you let it burn for long enough. **Grumbling** is one such low-grade fire. And don't we human beings love to grumble! It doesn't even really matter what the subject is – just give us the opportunity to complain about

something that irritates us, something that we don't like, something that leaves us feeling unhappy. We might thirst for resolution, but that's the thing about grumbling: expressing our discontent through the sullen complaining that is grumbling rarely does anything to address the very issues about which we grumble! But grumbling is so much easier than actually doing something to address the source for the complaint, than making the effort to use our tongue to communicate with others. And so, the grumbling can continue on and on, like a low-grade flame on a pressure cooker, until things explode and people get burned.

"Grenades," on the other hand, are much more fast-acting. When it comes to our use of language, they're those times when we hurl harmful words towards a target. The words may be few in number, but explosive in their effect. These days, though, you'll find that the tongue's grenades are now thrown through the written word more often than spoken. In this era of electronic communication, we can find it much easier to do damage to one another when we're at a safe distance, or shielded behind the impersonal anonymity of a display screen. Grenades fly through the Internet to e-mail inboxes, Facebook and Twitter accounts, or message boards. How often do we trip when tempted to get in a quick shot at someone? How often are we thoughtless in the tone and content of our language when we're not face-to-face with the recipient of our messages? We might thirst for revenge against those who have wronged us. We might thirst for supremacy over those who disagree with us. We might thirst for popularity at the expense of others. And so, we trip, speaking or typing our grenades into the air.

When it comes down to it, each of us has an arsonist living inside us. Gossip, grumbling, and grenades are some of the tools that it uses to set fire to the world. All of these uses of language are rebellion against the Eighth Commandment, either actively or passively bringing harm to people around us through our words. What hope, then, do we have? Will you and I trip and fall and burn? In our hopelessness, **grace** and **glory** come into the picture.

In Christ, God steps in and gives us another "g": **grace**. Through Jesus' cross, God has cleared the way for us to be connected to something that can quench the thirst inside us, something that can drown the fiery tongue. The ordinary water of the baptismal font, linked with God's extraordinary Word, connects us with Jesus' death and resurrection – it connects us with the Living Water that he gives to the world. This Living Water quenches the thirst within us; it drowns even the fiery tongue. Walking by faith in this life, Christians can remember their baptism each and every day, recalling that water that God the Father used to adopt them as His children. And remembering our baptism, remembering God's grace, we can drink deep of that Living Water which God pours out through the words of Scripture. And so watered, our lives are no longer dry, no longer susceptible to the fire of hell: the wildfire that comes from the tongue cannot burn, because there's no fuel for it to consume.

Drenched in God's baptismal grace, we can now give **glory** to the One who has saved us from the fire. As His people, connected to that never-ending stream of Living Water in Jesus Christ, we are a watered and watering people. And **watered tongues do trip**. But this isn't the "stumble and fall" kind of tripping; you see, "to trip" can also mean "to skip and dance." **As people living in God's grace, our tongues can and should be tripping**, singing God's praise and using the gift of language in a way that glorifies His Name. Instead of burning the world down, our words can now put out fires, and protect other people's reputations. We become water-bearers who nurture parched lives.

And so, we come to the close of our "Walking by Faith" summer sermon series. The epistles we've studied, these letters to the early church, still speak to us today, relaying the same central message of hope that they first did nearly 2,000 years ago: as we live in this world, God is with us, offering a sense of direction far beyond that which the world might afford. Just as He promises to the children baptized at St. John's this weekend, God has marked us with the cross of Christ and made us His children forever.

Amen.