



“TONGUE TWISTING”
SCRIPTURE: PROVERBS 1:20-33; JAMES 3:1-12
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 16, 2018
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Proverbs 1:20-33

1:20 Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.

1:21 At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

1:22 "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"

1:23 Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.

1:24 Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,

1:25 and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof,

1:26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,

1:27 when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.

1:28 Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.

1:29 Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,

1:30 would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof,

1:31 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.

1:32 For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them;

1:33 but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God

James 3:1-12

3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

3:2 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.

3:3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

3:4 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.

3:5 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!

3:6 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.

3:7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

3:8 but no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

3:9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

3:11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

3:12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

The toughest tongue twister in the English language has been carefully crafted from the latest data about the neural pathways of speech and the mechanics of the tongue. Are you ready for it?

“Pad kid poured curd pulled cod.”¹

That’s right: Pad kid poured curd pulled cod.

Try saying that 10 times fast. Keep in mind that one of the things that makes it the twistiest of twisters is that it is totally nonsensical—your brain has trouble remembering it.

“Pad kid poured curd pulled cod.”

Your brain actually struggles with twisters like this not because it gets sounds mixed up but because similar muscle movements in the tongue’s eight different muscle groups are used in close succession to each other and your brain can’t keep it all straight when things are so close to the same.

Pad kid poured curd pulled cod. (3x)

After a few times, your brain just starts to give up—it’s tongue muscle overload. The tongue and brain can only take so much tension, so much overlap of exertion, so much challenge. And then we start to get sloppy, we start to shut down, we start to say things that have no constructive purpose.

It comes as no surprise that we human beings are prone to struggle with tension. Tension is, well tense. It’s hard to live with—we want a release, we want relief. And often we want the relief sooner rather than later. It can be hard for us to believe that tension can be generative, even creative.

Instead we often seek verbal quick release valves like distraction, avoidance, denial, defensiveness, demonizing, retreat, or gossip.

Gossip is a uniquely human response to tension. Gossip fills in the unknown with things like rumors, conjecture, and accusation that temporarily relieve tension we’re feeling—we’ve all done it.

I am sure everyone here has felt the regret that gossip often leaves in its wake—because the tension that it temporarily relieves, usually circles back ten-fold when the things we said, the things we like to hash and rehash with our conversation partners take on a life of their own—things we said without knowing if they are true, then somehow become true just because we put it “out there” into the ether of how people feel about other people, how people regard other people.

Why is it so hard for human beings to stop before we speak and think about the consequences of our speech? One reason is that it feels good for at least a few minutes, to release some tension we feel within us.

All sentient beings develop ways to deal with tension—and all sentient beings have ways of communicating to relieve tension.

Dogs growl, horses snort, cats hiss—these are all warnings to anyone who will listen, that something needs to change, that tension needs to be released.

Animals that live in packs or herds, like we humans do, have stronger bonds and trust when they have vocalizations that relieve tension and build community at the same time.

Wolves, for instance, use their tongues to connect, to build and strengthen their community, to help the lost find their way home.

Scientists believe that some howling that wolves do is purely to express love, purely to strengthen the bonds of their pack.² They raise their heads to vocalize so their voices can carry—as far as 6-10 miles depending on the terrain because packs have large territories. Wolves don't just howl because they are hunting or pursuing prey, they howl because they need and want to have a strong community, they want to build trust.

Each wolf has a unique voice and sound. They create harmony when they howl together, often making their chorus sound like it includes many more voices than it actually does—this keeps them safe against possible predators. But this harmonizing that they do also just makes their social bonds stronger, their relationships healthier.

Their howling is preventative medicine for the anxiety and stress that can come from life on earth. They build trust and resilience and affection for one another, so that when they encounter tension, they have ways to get through it together.

It is a beautiful way to use the tongue's power—to build confidence in one another, to honor multiple voices, to signal to the world around them that they take care of each other and that they are strong.

For the author of James, speech itself is a work of faith—it is not simply about the words themselves, but about the heart and mentality that gives rise to words, and the relationships that our speech creates.

James was a product of his culture—a culture that highly valued wisdom and rhetoric and esteemed the speech of teachers.

The author of James' concern is about the integrity of communities of faith—that their piety be embodied in two things: proper speech and active concern for the poor and afflicted.

These verses are James' deep dive into the nature of proper speech. And his words don't pull any punches. James knows the damage the tongue can do—and he knows the discipline required for our tongues to be trustworthy, to be creators of right-relationship. He also knows the penchant our tongues have to be deceivers and to cultivate wrong relationship.

Jesus followers cannot be double-minded or double-tongued. Brackish water does not flow from the same spring as fresh water. James' measure of language's integrity goes back to the community and what kinds of relationships our words kindle. God's speech creates right relationship—and our speech should be bridled, rudder-ed by God.

But it's so easy to let anxiety, envy, fear, or anger take the reins, that in times of stress we unbridle our tongues often become destructive instead of wise.

In times of tension and stress, honoring the creative and the sacred power of speech requires that we take time to examine our thinking, our feelings, our hearts, our souls, our sensations—the things that give rise to speech.

When we speak out of our anxiety and fear, are we able to name and claim our own feelings, or do we grasp at people to blame or search for like-minded alliances to make us feel more justified?

When we speak out of our confusion, are we able to be vulnerable and open to new perspectives, or do we focus our speech on self-defense or, worse yet, on demeaning the messenger of divergent ideas?

Speech that strengthens our community is transparent, not veiled. It is about seeking stronger community, not gossiping that erodes community.

For Grace Covenant to continue to grow in our health and in our witness to Christ's love, our tongues must not be used to dominate our opponent or to flatter simply to achieve popularity or to lash out at opposition or to sow seeds of discontent. Rage and envy do not create healing. But righteous anger and honest vulnerability can.

Wisdom cries out in the streets, at the center of community. She warns us of our own willful ignorance. No one can claim not to hear her. When we refuse to listen to her, we bring on our own calamity.

All over the wisdom writing in Proverbs, she yearns for us to listen—pouring out her words, reaching out her hand. She knows what we've got in store for ourselves if we don't listen.

We will reap what we sow. And in our panic, it will be too late, our connection with wisdom washed away in the storm of our anxiety.

These are hard words to hear. And they have an eerie tone as North and South Carolina are drowning in the worst storm to rain down its destruction on these states in recorded history.

We've been warned for decades of the vulnerability of our coastlines with rising sea levels, over development, and destruction of habitats that protect our coasts in these epic storms.

As science tells us to wake up and listen to the truth about what we are doing to our planet, are we able to hear wisdom crying out in the streets, at the gates of the city—or are we too consumed in our panic or our denial, our waywardness or our political polarization? Is it too late to be wise, to cultivate right relationship with our planet and with all that lives and breaths?

These are difficult questions—and the stakes are getting higher and higher.

We started with a tongue-twister, let's end with a poem—something that can expand our spirits, regenerate our connection, nudge us into the sensations of right relationship and words that heal instead of harm.

Poetry is the antithesis of a tongue twister. Tongue twisters bewilder our tongues. Poetry gives our language room to breath. Tongue twisters use words to overwhelm, poetry uses words to inspire.

“Meeting Wolf” by Mary Oliver, published in 2009 in her collection, *Evidence*, in which she speaks with urgency about human impact on the natural world.

Instead of tiring our tongues and overwhelming our brains, let the poetry that shares a moment of connection between a woman and a wolf speak wisdom into our stormy moment.

We will take our time with this poem. Hear the voice of our sister who takes the time to listen to the wisdom of four-leggeds and flowing streams and birds moving to higher ground.

Listen for wisdom. The wisdom that calls you to the integrity of our faith—to speech that comes from the heart seeking after healing that the Spirit is here to give.

Meeting Wolf
by Mary Oliver

There are no words
inside his mouth,
inside his golden eyes.

So we stand, silent,
both of us tense
under the speechless but faithful trees.

And this is what I think:
I have given him
intrusion.

He has given me
a glimpse into a better but now broken world.
Not his doing, but ours.

(read again)

How we listen and how we speak into the profound challenges of our time matters.
Our tongues have power—the power to harm and the power to heal.

Jesus reaches into our hearts, into our souls, and changes us from the inside, out.
You are so loved that the words that reverberate from your tongue should echo the
beating heart of a God who loves each and every one of us fiercely.

And it is that love that gives us the power to co-create a world healed of our own
refusal to know the sound of God's voice—calling, howling, whispering, shouting,
musing, singing a song to us about a better world.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.nature.com/news/why-tongue-twisters-are-hard-to-say-1.12471>

² <https://www.britannica.com/story/why-do-wolves-howl>
<https://thoughtcatalog.com/january-nelson/2018/07/why-do-wolves-howl/>