

“The Tongue is a Fire”

The Rev. Ryan Wiksell



September 15, 2024

17th Sunday after Pentecost

St. Michael's Episcopal Church

Independence, MO

May I speak with the Breath of God, from the Word of God, in the Name of God, Amen.

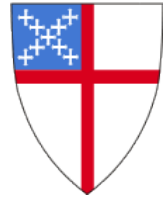
- Last week I spoke for 20 minutes
 - That is unacceptable. I think it might even be a Title IV violation
 - So I'm asking for your forgiveness here, and please don't report me.
- In fact, I'll make it up to you with a much shorter sermon today
- I don't take lightly what it means to get up here nearly every week to share my heart and mind with you, hopefully for the sake of the gospel
 - James is right when he talk about the power of the tongue, after all.
- Anyway, a few weeks ago our church underwent one of its most significant updates in years.
 - We had all our wiring replaced in the old farmhouse section of the church – what we now know as the Parish Hall, and also the side rooms, the basement and the attic
 - Dwight had identified a real hazard with the old knob-and-tube wiring, and the breaker panel was no good either

- The whole system was prone to failure, and failure could mean a fire.
- So we didn't spend all that money just to stay hip to the latest trends in wiring.
- We did it for safety, and to protect our property
- But bad wiring is not the only way to burn a church down
 - There's also incense
 - That's how the chapel at VTS burned down in 2010. Some student disposed of a hot charcoal in a regular trash can and then locked up. The next morning the whole building was just gone.
 - I'll bet that student had egg on his face!
 - Thankfully we hardly ever use incense here, so we're good.
- But there's another way to burn a church down, and this is where James comes back in
 - We can burn it down with our words.
 - Now, this time we're talking about the church being the people, and not the building
 - Which is actually more accurate anyway.
 - Words can destroy a church, if we let them

- In fairness to me, I don't think James is talking about 20-minute sermons.
 - If we allowed smoking in church, then putting people to sleep might be a fire hazard.
 - But again, that's not the problem here.
- James says the tongue is a fire. And a great forest can be burned down by just a small flame.
 - Not only can a church be burned down by our words...
 - It's happened before. Maybe not here, but it's happened.
 - What are some of the ways our words can do this?
 - Backbiting, Gossip, Verbal Abuse, False Accusations, Boasting, Twisting the Truth, Bad-faith Teaching
 - Even Silence can do it – by withholding words that need to be shared.
- Notice Peter's experience in this morning's Gospel
 - "Get behind me, Satan!"
 - Why did Jesus say this to him? In response to Peter's words.
 - Peter rebuked Jesus. He said the wrong words.
- But earlier in the same passage Peter very much said the right words.
- I believe that James was right when he said the tongue is a fire

- “It sets on fire the cycles of nature”
- My old high school has a few acres set aside as a nature conservancy, which includes several biomes
 - One of them is prairie
 - In order to keep that prairie a prairie, they regularly do controlled burns to clear out the brush. Otherwise it becomes overgrown.
- The same fire can destroy, or maintain
 - It can warm, or it can burn. It can incinerate, or it can purify
 - It can burn down a church, or it can burn the incense, or the palms, or the candle wicks to make our worship beautiful.
- One utterance from Peter affirmed Jesus’ ministry
 - And the next utterance contradicted it.
- Your tongue is a flame, and so is mine.
 - Every word we speak is a spark, ready to start a fire
 - But what kind of fire is it going to be?
- Amen

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to September 14



Proper 19
Year B
RCL

Track 1 *or* *Track 2*

Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

or Wisdom 7:26-8:1

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 116:1-8

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

The Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Proverbs 1:20-33

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

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

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?

Give heed to my reproof;

I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

The Psalm

Psalm 19

Caeli enarrant

1 The heavens declare the glory of God, *
and the firmament shows his handiwork.

- 2 One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
- 3 Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard,
- 4 Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world.
- 5 In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun; *
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
- 6 It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
and runs about to the end of it again; *
nothing is hidden from its burning heat.
- 7 The law of the LORD is perfect
and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the LORD is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- 8 The statutes of the LORD are just
and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the LORD is clear
and gives light to the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the LORD is clean
and endures for ever; *
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey,
than honey in the comb.
- 11 By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 Who can tell how often he offends? *
cleanse me from my secret faults.
- 13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;
let them not get dominion over me; *

then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

The Epistle

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.

The Gospel

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”