

## Always Vigilant

Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 3:1-12 ; Mark 8: 27-38 ; Psalm 19 9-17-06

There is a powerful group of muscles we all have in our mouths. If we venture to take a good look inside we see what seems to be just a little piece of tissue. But it's not. This set of muscles is our tongue. Along with several other muscles involved there are four pairs of intrinsic muscles, those within our tongues that can alter the shape of the tongue for talking and swallowing. Since it contains no supporting skeletal structures for the muscles, the tongue is an example of a muscular hydrostat, like an octopus arm. It allows us to speak and eat and taste the food we so often enjoy. We are born with 10,000 taste buds and we die with 5,000. Our taste buds tell us if things are sweet or salty, sour or bitter. They can even protect us from consuming food that is past its freshness date.

Our tongues along with our teeth, lips and roofs of our mouths give us the ability to speak and to work our ways through tongue twisters such as: She sells sea shells by the sea shore.

The shells she sells are surely seashells.

So if she sells shells on the seashore,

I'm sure she sells seashore shells.

Our tongues never rest. Even when we are sleeping they are busy. Most of us do not give our tongues a second thought, we take them for granted unless we find them sending information to us that we want or need to decide just what may be going on inside our mouths.

I discovered this long before I had surgery to remove the lump on the roof of my mouth. For years my tongue had checked out the lump's progress reporting to me that it must be at least one foot in diameter. My tongue seems to exaggerate everything with which it comes in contact. When I finally was brave enough to have the little growth cut out a few weeks ago, it was far smaller than my tongue had reported but much larger than I had thought. The best thing about it was that it was gone.

During the days following the surgery, my tongue has enjoyed frequent excursions to the crater in the roof of my mouth as it slowly heals up and is filled up with new tissue.

It has been said that "the pen is mightier than the sword." I think many of us would agree that the tongue beats them both hollow as the mightiest weapon most of us will face or wield in life. If we have ever been on the wrong end of a scolding tongue, we understand the damage that may be done. If we have ever been in possession of a sharp tongue, we will know and understand the injury we may inflict on another person.

This past week, the Pope, of all people, forgot that we must be always vigilant about what it is we say or who it is we quote. People in positions of power sometimes learn, much to their dismay, that saying the wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong company can cause great trouble in the world. People with little to no power may discover the same thing in their little corners of the world. Once words are out of our mouths and into the world, they are as difficult to take back as it is to put toothpaste back in its tube.

In Isaiah, the prophet notes that he has been give the tongue of a teacher. He speaks of the good things he is able to do in helping others make it though life. He can offer words that sustain people through trials and tragedies. He also has ears that hear the word of God and that allow him to pass it on to others in confidence that all will be well.

He knows that no one will be able to find fault with him as long as he keeps his ears open to God's desire and uses his power of speech to share all that he has learned.

This is not just true of prophets, if we all would manage to tune our hearts, souls and minds to the message God offers us and then share it with those all around us, we could help create a better world. But, all too often it seems, we either refuse to hear the message or we manage to hear a bit and then distort it, or we ignore it all together and go on our merry way.

The message that echoes through our Old and New Testaments is one of love and caring for our fellow humans. There are instances and stories in which it may not seem to be that message, but, if we remind ourselves to work through the entire story, we will find this underlying theme running through it.

The little Letter of James, warns us of the misuse and abuse of our tongues. The author reminds us that an unbridled tongue can bring great misery and unhappiness. Our tongues spew forth blessings and curses. The tongue is viewed as something destructive and evil. And it can be. Especially when it is used without any thought, without any connection to the centers of our beings and our faith.

Many of us are very good at shooting from the hip. We think it is a good thing to "tell it like it is." Sometimes it is. But, we can learn to couch the language we use to make what we say less loaded and less painful to the ears that hear it. We can think before we speak and in that way begin to bridle our tongues if not our thoughts. Living in a small community brings home to us, on a frequent basis; the harm unbridled tongues can do to all of us. It can teach us the necessity of being always vigilant when we offer an opinion on anything or anyone.

Lest we think from James that all is lost because of our wagging tongues, it is not. Jesus reminds us, in the Gospel of Mark, that we are always offered the opportunity to turn our lives around and to make all things new again. We can use the power of our tongues and the thoughts of our minds and the knowledge of our faith to spread the good news of the gospel. The good news that we are loved and cherished and forgiven by a God who cares for us and who never lets us go. No matter who we are or where we are in life, we are God's beloved children. For us, as Christians, life can become new again when we truly decide to follow Jesus. This is not an easy task and we may find ourselves alone on the pathway. But there is tremendous value in living lives of thoughtfulness, kindness, forgiveness and love. Each of us needs to measure how much better our life would be if we lived by Christ's principles.

There is a little song the choir used to sing in my former church. The words are:

*I have decided to follow Jesus,  
I have decided to follow Jesus,  
I have decided to follow Jesus,  
No turning back, no turning back.  
Though I may wonder, I still will follow,  
Though I may wonder, I still will follow  
Though I may wonder, I still will follow.  
No turning back, no turning back.  
The world behind me, the cross before me,  
The world behind me, the cross before me  
The world behind me, the cross before me,*

*No turning back, no turning back.  
Though none go with me, I still will follow,  
Though none go with me, I still will follow,  
Though none go with me I still will follow,  
No turning back, no turning back.  
Will you decide now to follow Jesus,  
Will you decide now to follow Jesus,  
Will you decide now to follow Jesus.  
No turning back, no turning back.*

The decision to give up our old way of life and take up the new, offered to us by Christ, is always in our hands. We have the power to make ourselves new again. We have the power to model a better way of life in all we say and do and think. There is always another chance at life, always another chance. Amen