

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!” This Wednesday Refugio Manuel Jimenez Jr and Angela Renee Jimenez are due to appear in court over a wildfire they started in September of last year. This wildfire covered an area comparable to La Crosse, Onalaska, and La Crescent, and it took two months to extinguish, damaged many homes, killed a firefighter, and injured several others. Their crime? Using a smoke bomb at the gender reveal party for their child.

James uses a forest fire as an example of how destructive the tongue can be. He writes, **“And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”**

We’re continuing our sermon series on the book of James, and as we discussed last week, James has a concern for how we live. Saving faith isn’t just about what we say about Jesus, it has to do with how we walk the walk of following our savior. Today’s sermon is going to focus on the tongue.

James is explaining the second commandment in this text. The second commandment is “You shall not take the name of the Lord, Your God, in Vain.” Luther explains it in the Small Catechism “We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.”

Sins of the tongue have to do with not swearing nor using foul language, but there’s more than that going on here. James starts chapter 3 writing, **“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”** On this Education Sunday, we think of Sunday School teachers, but more specifically here, James is talking about pastors.

3. The Lord opens pastors' lips, that their mouths may declare His praise. James continues, **“For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well.”** When the Lord opens pastors’ lips, it’s not so they can spout off with whatever opinions they might have. It’s not so they can impress you with their extensive knowledge. It’s so that they can teach you God’s Word purely. And declaring God’s praises and teaching pure doctrine go hand in hand. That is how we properly use God’s name, we call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

“Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, 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 things.” Churches are also big institutions, sometimes thousands of people can attend a single congregation on a weekend. Often the pastor acts as a rudder, directing things in the congregation.

If you're the devil, you're working overtime to fill the pastor's mouth with deadly poison, cursing, and salt water. The devil is tempting pastors to compromise pure doctrine for muddy inconsistency in practice and teaching. And so we pray, **"Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!"**

On this topic, I think of a non-Lutheran church in Seattle, Washington. It started with a group of 30 people meeting in a youth room. In a matter of 17 years, it had grown to a church network with fifteen different sites with a weekly average of 13,000 visitors between all locations. It was all headed up by a man one author gave the nickname, Mark the Cussing Pastor.

I guess the explanation is in the name. This pastor drew a following from telling it like it is. He would shout at people in his sermons and would occasionally cuss in his sermons. To many, this was a breath of fresh air from pastors who would be polite and beat around the bush, but the same thing that caused its success also led to its demise.

Controversies arose with this pastor over accusations of lack of self-control, verbal aggression, arrogance, and anger. One can't help but reflect on James' words, **"but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."** Some churches have scandals with pastors and sexual abuse, others financial mishandling, this church had a problem with verbal abuse.

When Mark the Cussing Pastor stepped down in 2014, the church shut down within two months. Many of local Seattle pastors took refugees from the church that closed, many of whom were hurt and confused by the lead pastor's actions. Countless others have left the faith for good, never darkening the door of another church.

"O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." We see what's at stake with the bridling of the tongue. James warns pastors of the perils of becoming a teacher in the church.

Not many of us are pastors here, but 2. The Lord opens teachers' lips, that their mouths may declare His praise. On this education Sunday, we realize that much is riding on the Christian education given to us and our children. And the Lord opens the lips of Lutheran School teachers, principals, and classroom aides. The Lord opens the lips of Sunday School teachers, Bible study leaders, and youth directors. He opens their lips not so they can use their tongues to complain about the problem children in the classroom. He opens their lips so that they can declare His praises.

On this Education Sunday, we uplift the teachers past and present who have taught and teach the Christian faith. Whether it is a volunteer Sunday school teacher, a Lutheran school teacher, or a lay leader of Bible study, this day is to recognize how important it is for God's people to have lips that declare His praises by explaining and expounding upon God's almighty Word.

But the point is this: this teaching doesn't only happen in a parish setting. This happens in the home. Parents, especially fathers, are the teachers of the home. In Luther's Small Catechism, each of the headings of the six chief parts has the phrase "as the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household." A healthy church is made up of healthy families whose tongues are tamed by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word.

And so on this Education Sunday, I as your pastor commend to you a life of using your tongue to bless our Lord and Father. And that lifestyle happens as you not only show up to Church on Sunday, but you take part in the many Christian education activities we have here. Take home the green insert in your bulletin, use it as a devotional guide. If you use nothing else from that insert, simply read the assigned New Testament reading and ignore the rest. It is through God's Word alone that our salty tongues turn pure again.

1. The Lord opens your lips, that your mouths may declare His Praise. We are people of unclean lips. Isaiah the prophet knew this as He stood in the presence of the Almighty God in His throne room. He said, "**Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!**" Yet a seraphim touched Isaiah's mouth with a burning coal and said, "**Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.**" And so the Lord comes to us, and opens our mouths as well through the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is our teacher whose tongue steers the Church in the right direction. His words are a cool rain shower, extinguishing the forest fires we start through our words and actions. His mouth is the fountain from which we drink fresh, clean words of Gospel. He is the tree who bears a word fitly spoken which is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

And He took on your sins of the tongue. He took on your sins as He bore the reproaches of many false witnesses. He took on your slander as He endured false teaching. He tamed His tongue as "**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.**" He was silent in His trial, torture, and condemnation so that your lips could be opened to sing His praises.

Whether you're a pastor, a teacher, or just an average everyday person in the pew. **THE LORD GIVES US TONGUES TO BLESS, NOT TO CURSE!** Imperfect people with untamed tongues are all He has to work off of. And so God used pastors like Mark the Cussing Pastor, and pastors like me to teach and guide God's people. He uses imperfect teachers, and imperfect parents and spouses to teach and to guide. It is the Lord who opens your lips, that your mouth may declare His praise. Thanks be to God, Amen!