



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, September 19, 2010
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock
on
James 1:19-27

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*A SERMON FOR EVENSONG ON
THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

This verse from the Epistle of James suggests that one sign of the truly religious is a disciplined tongue. In the way that a bridle prevents a horse from running away with itself, a bridled tongue is so governed that it is never in danger of running amok. And I would suggest that the bridle James means is at once the wisdom of God and the Love of Jesus Christ.

Wisdom, as found in Proverbs, has several things to say about disciplined speech.

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent. (10.19)

He who belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. (11.12)

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (12.18) If you find yourself prone to backbiting and gossip you might make a study of these passages.

But even if that is not your besetting sin, any of us would do well to make a study of wisdom, to sit at her feet and make her a friend. Having done so we might find that if we cannot trust ourselves to speak wisely, we might follow a second course of action just as blessed and that is to practice holy silence.

We now live in a society that is largely suspicious of silence and live in an age in which silence is passing into legend. We surround ourselves with devices and machines that raise the level of static in our lives. We have so engineered our world, populating it with transmission towers, each one piercing the heavens and spewing its babel into the atmosphere such that we cannot be still, rested or quiet.

Add to that din our own immoderate speech and the result is the antithesis of what speech was ever intended to be.

Imagine, if you will, the awesome silence that must have preceded the creation of the world. There God sits, alone in a void. Eternal, expansive silence. . . .

And from this silence bursts forth the divine Word. God's first creative act, his first move, the cosmos set to spinning by his creative speech. And having spoken the world and us into existence, the creator himself declares that what he spoke into being was good.

From those mighty acts and declarations, can we learn something simple; that speech was intended to be a creative act and not a destructive one?

Again from Proverbs: The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. (10.11) but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near.

Immoderate speech is at best harmful but when it hits its stride it is fatal. When we prate on thinking that every word that springs from our lips is as honey from the comb, we deceive ourselves and our religion is a vain thing indeed.

But when charity and love prevail and our speech is bridled by that love for others as Christ loved us, our speech, when necessary builds up the body, encourages our neighbors and bears fruit for God's kingdom. Immoderate speech sows discord and a bitter harvest of anti Christ is reaped.

It's that simple. Close your mouth to folly and let peace reign in your own life and in the lives of those you meet. As silence was God's muse in creation, so let it be your muse in conversation.

Archbishop John Tillotson once said that "A good word is an easy obligation; but not to speak ill requires only our silence, which costs nothing.

Careless words have often proven costly to the church. I have seen members lost to us through the careless and reckless words of their fellows. In days such as ours when mainline churches appear to be in a membership free fall, it might do well for us to look to the past.

In an age when the licentiousness of modern society became antithetical to religion, a certain man withdrew to a cave outside of Rome and entered into a great silence taking up the life of a hermit. Drawn to his simple life of faith, a community grew up around him. In time he wrote a rule to govern this community with some concerns in mind, chiefly, that order be established for the well-being of the community and to foster the love of God and care for human relationship through the disciplines of prayer, study and work.

In chapter VI of his Rule, Saint Benedict commends to us a bridled tongue, writing: "Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk, because it is written: 'In a flood of words you will not avoid sin' (Pr 10.19) and elsewhere, 'the tongue holds the key to life and death.'" (Pr 18.21)

Benedict continues: "I am writing these instructions to you, so that you may know how to behave so that no one may be upset or saddened in the household of God."