

# The Ship And Its Rudder

James 3:1-12

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

September 13, 2009 – Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. For centuries, the Church has been described in nautical terms – terms such as a ship, or a boat, or a life raft. Indeed, maybe you’ve even noticed some these nautical terms being used here in our own congregation from time to time. For example, the area of the Sanctuary in which you’re all now seated is called the nave – which comes from the Latin word for ship. And you might also be interested to know that there’s a pulpit on many ships. It’s that place from which the navigator steers the ship with the wheel. Speaking of the Church this way was first of all inspired by the writers of the Bible themselves – especially here in chapter three of the Epistle of James. Here the brother of our Lord Jesus was speaking to fellow pastors, but of course his words might also be applied in a general way to all Christians as they pursue their various callings in life. But the part of the ship James was concerned with wasn’t large, obvious, or easy to see like the mast or mainsail – nor was it even something that might look important, like the captain, the charts, the telescope, or the compass. No, for this parable, we must go below the surface of the vessel to sweep away all the muck and the algae, so we can focus on the lowly rudder.

The rudder is such a small instrument, James notes, but yet the irony is that it’s able to turn such a massive vessel as a large ship. In the very same way a bit and bridle, as small as they are, can exert control over the movement of a powerful horse by its rider, the small, yet mighty instrument that moves the ship of the Church is the rudder and tongue of the preacher which proclaims God’s Word for all in the nave to hear. And so that he is able to speak rightly without stumbling, a preacher has to be properly trained. But where James uses the phrase which is often translated as a “perfect man” when speaking of such preachers, we ought never take it to mean “one without sin,” but rather one who is “fully prepared.” The course of the Church must be set on the one hand with the righteous Law of God – given to us in summary form in the Ten Commandments – not only to direct our life, but also to accuse and condemn our sin so that we are left with no option but to plead to Christ for help and aid. On the other hand, the proper steering of the ship must also come from the preacher’s tongue as he proclaims the

Gospel to the people of God who are gathered in Christ’s Church to hear it – that is, a clear proclamation of the gracious work of God for our sake which leads us to – and includes – the holy death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

While the tongue of the preacher is the small, yet mighty rudder which directs the course of the Church according to God’s Word, your own tongue, in similar fashion, also has an important role. Whatever calling your heavenly Father may have bestowed upon you in this life, He who was the first ever to speak has also given you your tongue to proclaim and teach His Word in a context that’s appropriate for you. And make no mistake about it. What you say is immensely important, perhaps now more than ever. After all, they don’t call this the “information age” for nothing. Proper communication must be preserved pure and pristine, otherwise businesses will falter, relationships will crumble, nations will erupt into chaos – just like we see happening now – and, of course, the work of the Church might also be hindered.

But whatsoever things are capable of accomplishing a world of good in this fallen world of ours, these can also be used to inflict a staggering blow of evil. That’s why the Apostle takes great pains to warn us, as members of Christ’s body, of the evil of which our tongue is more than capable. Perhaps your life has suffered damage at one time or another thanks to a raging fire set ablaze by someone’s tongue. To be sure, even your own tongue may well have hurt another – even though you may have had no idea what was happening. Sticks and stones, contrary to what the old familiar nursery rhyme might say, can’t hold a candle to the kind of damage that the words of the tongue can inflict. And what makes all this even worse is that the fire of the tongue is the chief instrument of the devil’s reign of terror. Through James’ words, the Holy Spirit warns us that our sinful tongues are set on fire by hell – which means that Satan likes nothing better than when brothers and sisters in Christ lob and set off verbal grenades against one another. The devil knows full well that nothing else in this world can bring a more swift demise to a Christian congregation, or sink the ship of the Church so completely.

This fire is especially dangerous when kindled by the tongue of a pastor who takes away the clear teaching of the Word of God and substitutes his own opinions – or simply spews out meaningless garbage in an attempt to tickle the itching ears of his hearers. Does a ship not run aground when it attempts to navigate in shallow water? So likewise, doctrine that doesn't measure up to the Truth of Holy Scripture is nothing less than false doctrine, no matter how good it may sound to those who hear it. And when a Church is torn asunder, set ablaze or distressed due to some falsehood being proclaimed from the pulpit, the first things to be destroyed are the things that we must strive never to destroy – that is, the forgiveness of sins, the comfort of the Gospel, and the certainty of heaven. From the midst of the ashes of a Church destroyed this way will arise a hideous, man-made phoenix of trust – not in the Lord and what He has done, but in one's self. Soon people will be asking: “Have *I* done enough good?” “Have *I* made enough promises?” or, “Have *I* had a clear enough purpose driving my life?” Under the influence of an evil tongue, you see, the Bible will ultimately be turned into a mere book of rules, and Jesus will be changed from a gracious Savior into an impossible example no one could ever hope to follow.

Here in this text, then, James is giving us a chilling dose of reality. He reminds us that no one is able to tame the tongue, and that we all stumble in so many, many ways. The winds of fads and worldly desires are constantly blowing us to and fro and, so that by ourselves, we have no hope of ever resetting our lives to the proper bearing. We know that our sins, if not set aside, will ultimately cast us into a whirling abyss of eternal punishment and damnation. The storms we face continually throughout life will soon capsize the entire ship if nothing is done – which is why we need our Captain, Jesus Christ, to be onboard with us. We need Christ's calming Word of peace to soothe our tempest-tossed soul. His death, the shedding of His blood, and His glorious resurrection from the dead are the very things we need to bring us the clear skies of forgiveness for our sins. You've most certainly heard this Gospel comfort from my tongue already many times before. And you will likely receive even more words of grace from our Captain Himself before our time of worship together has been accomplished. Consider how, even now, the galley has been set for the perfect Supper to sustain you on your voyage to the promised

land, Christ's holy Body and Blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

If you've ever traveled by ship, you already know that often the passengers will have to be “tendered” to shore for a short visit. But all the time they're on land, they have to remember that a time is coming when they must return to the ship so the voyage can continue. Likewise, your vocation or calling in life at times “tenders” you, so to speak, from the ship of the Church to the land of this world. And as St. John reminds us, you are in this world, but not of it. Indeed, while you are out there in the world, there are works which God has already prepared in advance for you to do – as you help, aid and assist your neighbor as God's holy instrument. Prayer is needed both on the ship of the Church, and on the land of your daily life and work. But the land of this world is not your home. For spiritual strength and sustenance, you have to get back to the ship, back to the nave, back to your Captain, our Lord Jesus Christ, His Word, and His Sacraments. It's your calling from God to warn those who don't think they need to get on board about how wrong they are – and how much they need to hear with you the Word of our Lord from the rudder and tongue of your pastor, whom God has called and ordained to proclaim that Word.

Now at some time in the past I have no doubt that you yourself may have been burned by the hellish fire of an evil tongue. Indeed, if you're going to be honest, there may even have been a time or two when you used your own tongue to devastate an entire forest of your own. The winds and currents may be buffeting and tossing you to and fro – in your day to day life, in your family, at work, or at school. A great fire of false teachings may even, from time to time, set ablaze the Church gathered in one place or another. But do not fear when you come across pitfalls such as these on your voyage, for you already know that a boat which has Jesus riding in it will be just fine. And that's exactly what you have here, dear Christian, here in this nave, this ship of Christ's Holy Church. You know that a heavenly port of call awaits you in heaven one of these days – and that the Captain of this Ship has promised that He would provide for you a safe passage straight into our Father's waiting arms. May it always be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.