

LETHAL WEAPON

Sermon, September 12, 2021

Texts: Psalm 19; Proverbs 1:1-7, 20-33; James 3:1-12

You may have guessed I borrowed another sermon title from the cinema. Lethal Weapon was a series of four films, the first of which came out in 1987 (*the fourth was 1998; as I understand it, there was a Lethal Weapon 5 in the works that ceased production*), each starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover as a mismatched pair of Los Angeles Police Department detectives. Mel Gibson played the role of a semi-unbalanced and borderline suicidal police detective named Riggs; Danny Glover played the role of the more staid senior detective Sergeant Murtaugh. Riggs is a capable, competent, skilled and even gifted detective but occasionally goes somewhat berserk; he's called a "lethal weapon" because no one ever knew quite when he's going to "go off." Well, in like manner, our tongues can be lethal weapons, as James would tell us ... like Officer Riggs, you never know when it is going to go off! The tongue is capable of great things, when competently used with skill, tact, wisdom, patience, love and eloquence, but it is also capable of creating great harm when not under control. James tells us it is nearly impossible to tame it. Thomas Watson wrote, *"God has given us two ears, but one tongue, to show that we should be swift to hear, but slow to speak. God has set a double fence before the tongue, the teeth and the lips, to teach us to be wary that we offend not with our tongue."* The Creator knew what He was doing when He placed this lethal weapon behind two fences ... the teeth and the lips.

A common theme weaving through today's Scripture readings is the theme of wisdom, more specifically, the wisdom from on high, God's wisdom. The Proverbs reading is pretty straightforward and refreshingly lucid: *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."* *"Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public square; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, at the entrance of the city she cries out: 'How long O simple ones will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? ... The waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster."*

The word "fool" as used in the Hebrew describes one who is morally deficient (*as noted in the pew Bible footnote of this passage*), implying some degree of personal culpability. The last time we looked at this passage I mentioned I had learned Southerners have a hierarchy of insults. It begins with *simple*, moves on to *dumb*, and from dumb to *ignorant*, and from ignorant to *foolish*. It's relatively harmless and often in good fun to be called "simple" by a Southerner, a tad insulting to be called "dumb," but to be called "ignorant" is a pretty serious insult. However, the worse insult in this hierarchy is to be called a "fool." (*On a related note, I'm also told the ultimate insult in the south is to call someone a Liar ... which adds an interesting cultural dimension when the label "liar" is used so frequently in our politically polarized times, but I'm not going there this morning.*) Here in Proverbs Lady Wisdom sounds a bit like an indignant southern belle when she says they who hate knowledge have become *fools*. Fools apparently not only despise wisdom's counsel, but they have no respect or regard for God whatsoever, and are determined to go their own way by their own lights.

Lady Wisdom issues this warning: *Ignore me, and calamity will strike. Spurn me, and you'll suffer ... and I'll laugh at you.* Talk about no fury like a woman scorned! To be sure, it is not so much that Lady Wisdom is vindictive toward those who spurn her counsel; it is not so much that God punishes us when we disregard His wisdom and law. The reality is that calamity is simply the harsh consequence of our own foolhardy actions. The painful consequences are the natural result of our having ignored the wisdom of God's good ways. I'm always a bit troubled when someone says God is punishing them for such and such an action or behavior. No, God really is not the one punishing. They are simply suffering the consequences of their own behavior. It is what happens when, having been told not to play in the street, we go ahead and run right out into the traffic of foolhardy living. Do that long enough or often enough, sooner or later you will get hit and/or hurt. Lady Wisdom is clear; her ways lead to life. Ignore her, scoff at her, at your own peril.

To be sure, I should acknowledge the painful reality that there are times when we suffer the consequences of *others'* foolish behavior through no fault of our own. However, that's not really in the scope of this sermon to fully address this morning, other than to say that there are times we may have been making every effort to live wisely and honorably, but we still can suffer from the foolhardy, malicious, dangerous, cruel and/or wanton behavior of foolish others. As we commemorated yesterday, the

twentieth anniversary of the treachery of 9-11, there are certainly times when innocent people are adversely affected, harmed, even killed by the destructive behavior of fools, deadly fools.

Psalm 19, from which our last hymn was inspired, is a celebration of God's wisdom, revealed not only in the world around us, but given to us in written form through God's Law. The Psalmist proclaims the law of the Lord is perfect, right, clear, pure, and sure. It revives the soul, makes wise the simple, gives joy to the heart, gives light to the eyes, and gives us perspective from which to see the world and understand our own place within it. The Psalm ends *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."* This is a prayer that should be prayed by all of us, every day, ideally at the beginning of the day. When the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts are bridled, reined in, controlled by the gracious gift of God's wisdom and Word, we are the much better off for it ... and so are those around us. That's especially true for those who have to put up with hearing the words of our mouths day in and day out; we need to take care that the "bullets" which issue from our "lethal weapon" are fired sparingly, carefully, discretely, lovingly, wisely and under divine control.

James underscores the importance of the words of our mouths when he speaks of the wisdom that comes from above. He begins his lesson by speaking of the significant responsibility of being a teacher, which is an appropriate lesson for this Rally Day Sunday. Teachers have an awesome responsibility, warns James, for much good *and* much harm can come through their words and their examples. And in a way, we are all teachers ... parents and grandparents and neighbors and coworkers and classmates ... all of us have a "teaching" role toward those who look to us for example, guidance, encouragement, instruction, inspiration. James goes on to point out the potentially dangerous character of the primary instrument teachers use, which is the human tongue. He goes on to say that if we can control the tongue we can control the whole body; but if the tongue is uncontrolled, the whole life can be set on wrong and destructive paths. As a bit guides a powerful horse and a small rudder directs a large ship, so the tongue, seemingly so small and insignificant, can really direct the whole course of a human life for good or ill ... and not just the life of the speaker, but the lives of all within earshot. Our words matter!

James says the tongue can be *"a restless evil, full of deadly poison."* He goes on to say that while we may have the ability to subdue and tame all sorts of creatures, we human beings have great difficulty taming our own tongue. Again, our tongues are potentially lethal weapons. Don't be like the late Arabella Young, who is buried in an English country cemetery with this epitaph on the gravestone: BENEATH THIS STONE, LIES ARABELLA YOUNG, WHO, ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF MAY, BEGAN TO HOLD HER TONGUE. As someone wisely put it, one reason a dog is such a lovable creature is that his tail wags instead of his tongue. You may remember the "THINK" test of Alan Redpath. He wrote, "If what I'm about to say does not pass the THINK test, I will keep my mouth shut!" What is the "THINK" test? Before you speak, ask yourself: Is what I'm about to say: T - Is it true? H - Is it helpful? I - Is it inspiring, uplifting? N - Is it necessary? K - Is it kind? Especially "kind." Mother Theresa once said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."

I know it is human nature to gossip about people's vices, but try "gossiping" kindly about people's virtues, not their vices. Spread tales about the *good* things you see people do! All of us instinctively know that the person who gossips TO you will gossip ABOUT you. Well, a person who comes to you saying nothing but good things about others, then you'll want to be around such a person, because you trust that such a person will then go and report good things about you as well! Speaking nothing but kind words does SO much to foster healthy community. Again, THINK before you speak – is it true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it kind? And if it isn't all of these things, then just keep quiet.

As we talked about two weeks ago, words can hurt, and no one ever forgets hearing hurtful words. There are better ways to unload a shotgun than just blasting off. People can get really hurt when that happens; keep your finger off the trigger! I think James would say, *"Unless you are planning on using your tongue to bless someone, just stop talking."* James wrote, *"With the tongue, we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in God's likeness. From the same mouth come praise and cursing, my brothers, this should not be!"* The tongue can be a lethal weapon; it can also be a powerful live giving force for good.

Let us make every effort to wisely let "the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts" be pleasing in the sight of God, Who is our Rock, and our Redeemer.