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**“Bridled and Birthed”
A sermon by Candice Ryals**

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Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23; Psalm 125; James 1:17–27; Mark 7:24–37

God make my mouth a vessel for your word. Soften our hearts that we would receive what you would have us to hear today. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

James is a no-nonsense kind of guy. We need people like him in the church, people who cut to the heart of the matter, ask the uncomfortable questions, people who boldly say what the rest of us may be thinking but are too polite to voice in public. James is not overly concerned about being polite because he knows what he has to say is urgent. He is writing to the early church in a volatile situation. There are false teachers and philosophers crooning to Christians at every corner, subtly gnawing at the faithful and leading them to doubt. Members are falling away, and the church is shrinking. And so James urges his readers, in the midst of such a raucous crowd, “Be quick to listen. Be slow to speak.”

When James talks about bridling the tongue, I get this image out of some old western movie of a runaway horse hurtling hell-bent in a cloud of dust, where they would jerk hard on the reins to stutter to a halt, and peace is restored, and all is well and under control. It's not too far off from experience. I'm sure that many of us can name a time or two when our tongues seem to have run away from us.

I still clearly remember a moment when I was in sixth grade. I was so self-conscious and nervous, desperate to make friends. I was sitting at the lunch table, talking and laughing with a group of girls, when an uncomfortable silence seized the group, and I suddenly realized that the girl I was talking *about* and laughing *at* was standing behind me, gripping her lunch tray, on the verge of tears. I learned something that day about the power of speech. Maybe some of you too have stood in the shameful wake of your words. Maybe you've experienced the wounds lashed out by someone else's runaway tongue. Most of us carry the memories of both. We all know the damage that untamed words can do.

Be slow to speak. Gossip slips and slithers through our community. It may seem harmless in the moment, but it stings distant victims and slowly strangles the life out of us. Lies masquerade and mislead, twisting and turning truth until we are all left dizzy. Anger spouts and crackles, burning and biting, or sometimes it coats kind words with subtle sarcasm like candy dipped in poison.

These are some of the fruits of a runaway tongue, and James warns us against them because they will destroy a community. James especially cautions against anger – it does not produce God's righteousness, he says. We need to listen to this point carefully because there is a lot to be angry about in this world. James' caution should not silence us – the exclusion and abuse and suffering that we witness and experience rightly rouses our anger. But if we unleash that anger on others using our words as weapons and think that it is an act of righteousness, we deceive ourselves.

So be slow to speak. There is room for expression of anger in the Psalms, in prayer. There is room for pronouncement of God's judgment in the prophets. Yet,

James warns us that if we stand in violation of any mark of the perfect law, we are accountable for all of it. Our anger does not *produce* God's righteousness but is *contained* by it. Knowing that we all stand guilty, our anger is hemmed in by humility and compassion. This does *not* water down our truth-telling, but it adjusts our tone. Be slow to speak, but not too slow.

To bridle the tongue is not finally about restriction, but communication. I have a friend who rides horses professionally, and she explained to me how the metal bit is not for binding down the tongue or controlling the horse against its will. It *is* there so that the rider can guide the horse and give instruction, but it *also* allows the *rider* to listen to the *horse* in a way that it is able to communicate. The bridle enables the horse to speak in a way that the rider pays attention to. So when James cautions us to bridle our tongues, he points to the *dialogue* that is necessary between us and God. Without it, religion is worthless. Before we speak to the world, the primary role of our speech is conversation with God.

With tongues bridled in prayer, we speak to God and accept God's wisdom as a guide for our steps. By learning to heed the word of Wisdom, we walk in the way of righteousness, justice and prudence. For James, listening is no passive position; listening is a way of life. Our lives *look* different because of it. If we are quick to listen to the commands to love God and neighbor, we might find that we begin to resemble Christ's characteristics. For James, this means we care about the things *Jesus* cared about, we care for the *people* Jesus cared for. Orphans and widows were among some of the most vulnerable people in James' society. Love of God and love of neighbor involves love of folks who are marginalized and in distress, the ones who are not typically heard. Be quick to listen, be slow to speak.

In this way, we become doers of the word and not hearers only. The Word is incarnate, living and breathing within us. James warns that if we are merely hearers and not doers, then we are like those who look in a mirror, then go away and forget what we were like. In the midst of the competing claims of the world, it is all too easy to forget. I heard an African-American pastor once talking about the length of worship services in Black churches. He said the Sunday service in his church might stretch four, five, even six hours, because after being beaten down by the world for a week, it takes a good three hours for Black folk to remember that they are children of God created in God's image, and then the worship really gets underway.

We come here to be reminded. Gathered as the Body of Christ, we reflect back to one another our true identity. Our teenagers are assaulted daily by the pressures of popularity, defined by good grades and good looks. We are seduced by a consumerism that promises happiness and security if we only drive the right car (whether that be a Lexus or a Prius), wear the right brand, land the right job with health insurance. Who doesn't want happiness and security? But we wind up instead empty and estranged. We ebb and flow like the tide, fickle and flailing in the wind.

We gather here to be reminded that we are children of God created in God's image. Our worth is not measured by the length of our résumés or the breadth of our financial portfolios. We are baptized members of a single body with a diversity of gifts, and we gather at a table where all are welcomed without rank. We don't merely remember events that happened long ago in history, but we are made members anew in God's redeeming work right here, right now. As a Body, we are witnesses to a security that rests in what God has done, not what we can do. We

are witnesses to a power that is creative and self-emptying, a justice that is merciful and forgiving, and a love that is abundant and unearned.

In the midst of the raucous crowd of competing claims, God is our anchor: the Father of lights, creator of the sun and moon and stars that fill the heavens and light our paths. God does not quiver and flicker like our candles and fires as the last rays of sunset fade, and shadows gather. God does not fluctuate as the tides ebb and flow, and the moon waxes and wanes. God does not change as the leaves color, wither, and bud again. Even the firm ground beneath our feet has been known to wobble and quake, but God is steady and wisdom is sure.

This God, the Father of lights, the source of wisdom, is *our* source too. God gives *birth* to us, like a mother who grunts in pain as her womb contracts and her body shudders. God gave us birth through the word of truth nailed to the cross, muscles *cramping* under the strain, *pressure* tearing at the joints, as the blood flows freely and the sweat and tears run in salty streams. With gasps and sighs, God births us... waiting and willing us to life.

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