

Avast, me hearties! Shiver me timbers! Arrrrrrr! Now, I'm not sure if you are aware of it, or not, but soon and very soon, we will be celebrating, "Talk Like a Pirate Day." In fact, it is coming up this Thursday on September 19th. Don't worry though, if you aren't familiar with the holiday, because most likely that means you have been spending most of your time doing good and important things in this world. But if you are in the habit of wasting time surfing the Internet, looking for odd and amusing items, then maybe you have stumbled across this rather weird and silly excuse for a holiday.

After all, it's a day devoted to talking like a pirate. Just for kicks. Because it's funny. Because you can. But just be careful not to go too far and call a close friend a "scurvy bilge rat." He or she might not be very amused.

Now, talk Like a Pirate Day was invented by a couple of guys — no surprise there. They picked September 19 because it was not cluttered up with Christmas or the Super Bowl or any other important event. For years, the two of them celebrated the day in private, just talking like pirates to each other, but then humorist Dave Barry caught word of the holiday and wrote a column about it. He thought the idea was so original and revolutionary that surely the creators of the day needed to be on medication.

Dave Barry ended up inviting all of his readers to join the movement and celebrate the holiday. On September 19, do not answer the phone with "Hello!" Instead, he encouraged his followers to answer the phone with "Ahoy, me hearty!" And if the caller protests, saying that they are not hearty, call them "a scurvy dog who will soon be walking the plank where they will end up in Davy Jones' locker." See what fun you can have!

Now given that Talk Like a Pirate Day is just around the corner, it is fitting that today's passage of Scripture is the advice of James about taming the tongue. "Look at ships," says James, sounding like a salty sea dog; "though they are so

large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet 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 exploits.” Makes you want to say “Aye!” Doesn’t it?

As I’m sure most of us are well aware, the tongue is a small but very powerful instrument, able to have an effect that is every bit as influential as the rudder on a pirate ship. Think of the power that words have. Think of the impact the words you have heard, or that you have spoken, have had over the course of your life.

“You are too small to be a good basketball player,” says an assistant youth league coach. “Girls should steer clear of science and engineering,” advises a parent or a teacher. “You can’t be a Christian and believe that!” scolds a member of a Bible study. “You are such a loser,” says a cool kid in the high-school cafeteria. “Don’t tell your parents,” warns an abusive relative; “no one will believe you.”

James knows the devastating power of words, which is why he says, “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.” He knows that the tongue can be used to discourage, derail, dismay, deceive and destroy the precious children of God, and he describes it as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Which may cause us to wonder then, is there any way for us to tame the tongue?

Well, the challenge for us, as followers of Christ, is to Talk Like a Christian, rather than trying to Talk Like a Pirate. This means that we do not use our tongues to “bless the Lord and Father” one minute, and then “curse those who are made in the likeness of God” the next. It is not appropriate to offer up enthusiastic praise to God on Sunday morning, and then call your coworker a stinking bilge rat the next day when you’re at the office sharing weekend stories around the water cooler.

So, what does it mean for us to Talk Like a Christian — not just on one day in September, but throughout the year? After all, it's really very easy to talk like a pirate, since all you need to do is pepper your speech with "Ahoy!" "Avast!" "Aye!" and "Arrr!" But faithful Christian speech requires more than the proper vocabulary, more than a specialized knowledge of grog, hornpipes, timbers and yardarms.

To talk like a Christian, we need to speak to other people with a full awareness that they are created in God's image. This means that we see them not as scurvy bilge rats, but as men and women who are created in the image and likeness of God, breathed into being with the very breath of God himself! There is a holiness built into each human being, a sacredness that comes straight from our Creator, and we miss an important aspect of our existence when we overlook this quality.

Would you ever attempt to talk in a discouraging, deceptive, or destructive way to the Lord? Of course not! Our respect for God is far too high. Ok, if that is true, then why do we behave this way toward our brothers and sisters?

It is difficult, of course, to see the image of God in a person who has committed horrendous crimes — rape and murder, for example. But Sister Helen Prejean, the author of *Dead Man Walking*, believes that every person is worth more than his or her worst act. Every person bears the image of God, even if they have strayed far from God's way.

In 1982, Sister Helen began corresponding with a death-row inmate and ministered to him right up to his execution. After he took responsibility for his crimes of murder and rape, Sister Helen said to him: "You have dignity now, nobody can ever take that from you. You are a son of God." So, if somehow and in some way, we can come to believe that about a death-row inmate, we can and should believe it about our most annoying neighbors.

In addition, to talk like a Christian means that our words are a reflection of the word of God. If we go way back to the book of Genesis, we observe that God's word is creative — not destructive. God says, "Let there be light" ... and there is light. God says, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures" ... and there were all kinds of fish, large and small. God says, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind" ... and cattle and creeping things and all types of wild animals appeared on the Earth. It's clear that all of God's words are designed to be creative, to bring order out of chaos, and to make something good!

So, let me ask you an important question. Can the same be said of our words? Now, before you open your mouth to speak, you would be wise to apply the "Genesis Test" to what you are about to say. Is it creative? Does it bring order out of chaos? Does it make something good? If not, perhaps it would be better to remain silent.

In today's second lesson the Apostle James is aware that our tongues can be both creative and destructive, and he knows that they do not always pass the Genesis Test. "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing," he says, with deep regret. "My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." In other words, it is better for us to keep our mouths shut than to pollute the creative word of God with a destructive word of gossip or unfair criticism.

Finally, when we talk like a Christian, we speak in a way that is in line with the teachings of Jesus, the One who is the Word of God in human form. But this can often be an enormous challenge for us, because Jesus takes speech seriously, and he issues numerous warnings about the consequences of our language. For Jesus, words are never cheap — and they always pack a punch.

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder.'" No surprise there. But then Jesus says, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment ... and if you say,

‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” The Lord warns us against using empty phrases in our prayers, tells us not to judge others, and wraps everything up in the command to “do to others as you would have them do to you.” For Jesus, words are every bit as important as actions, because he knows that they have the power to build up or the power to break down.

Talking is more than having a heart to heart, chit-chatting, or conversing with others, according to Jesus. It’s a matter of life and death, with words of love and forgiveness having a radically different impact than words of hate and condemnation. As the Word of God in human flesh, it shouldn’t be all that surprising that Jesus takes all of this very personally.

Of course, it’s entirely up to you whether or not you want to try and Talk Like a Pirate this Thursday. Whether you try it out or not, It’s all in good fun! It’s a way to feel bold and daring, and it really won’t affect you all that much — unless you slip up and call your boss a scalawag. But if you Talk Like a Christian, you’ll be setting sail with Jesus on a most amazing adventure where your words will be creative, life giving, and good. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.