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James 3:1-12

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***James 3:1-12***

***Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will face stricter judgment. 2For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4Or look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.***

***How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! 6And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. 10From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.***

It turns out that when your mother threatened to wash your mouth out with soap, she was on to something. According to James, our tongues are that bad. What kind of a tongue expresses praise and blessings to God *and* also curses people? The tongue is “a restless evil, full of deadly poison!” In nature, a fig tree does not *also* yield olives; a grapevine does not *also* produce figs; salt water does not *also* yield fresh water; it is un-natural that the same mouth proclaim blessings and curses!

A few weeks ago when we were discussing the first chapter of this letter of James, we first heard of James’ three marks of a true religion. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: [1] to care for orphans and widows in their distress and [2] to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Today’s text is a further explanation of the third mark, “If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.”

Not only does James write in a style that is clearer and more understandable than the gospel writers, his analogies are not primarily agricultural. We can picture a horse wearing a bridle being controlled by the bit in its mouth. We can picture a ship being controlled by a small rudder – and even a small tug boat managing the movements of giant ships. Most of us, here anyway, know horses and ships more than we know farming. We understand the image of something relatively small having control over something much larger. Our tongues are relatively small parts of our bodies, yet since they are in control of the shaping of our words as they exit our mouths, they have much sway over our impact in the world.

Warning us against the dangers of not bridling our tongue, James is firm. The tongue in fact “stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell.” Not only does something small control our entire bodies, but unbridled our tongues cause great damage, out of proportion to the small size. Here James’ analogies are familiar to us also. “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.” This is not only meaningful for this Bethany congregation, but certainly a daily worry here in the Pacific Northwest and where fire season takes up much of the year.

This is an important message in any case. But finding these words here in our Bible gives the words more weight. Consider other ways words and speaking have been expressed. Both the beginning of the Old Testament and the beginning of the one of our Gospel accounts begin with an expression of words. In the book of Genesis, things were created when “God said…”

“God said, let there be light.”

“God said, let there be a dome in the midst of the waters…”

“God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.”

“God said, let there be lights in the dome of the sky…”

“God said, let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures…”

“God said, let the earth bring forth living creatures…”

“God said, let us make humans in our image…”

And the first chapter of the gospel of John reads, “”In the beginning was the Word…”

Also Ephesians and Proverbs give us words of wisdom about speaking. Ephesians 4:29 says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Proverbs 10:19 says, “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.”

James’ audience would have been taught these words from Genesis and Proverbs. Neither they or we can hear James’ words about right speech and without also remembering where we’ve heard that lesson before. Even Psalm 19:14 which often begins a sermon prayer, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God.”

Teachers, an honorable and prestigious role in the 1st century (and still should be!), were those who uses words the most according to James. James’ primary caution is to those who teach. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters…” These days though, James could be referring to teachers, preachers, grant writers, speech writers, policy writers, novelists, and yes, politicians. Even Hallmark cards for that matter. Our current society contains a dramatic spectrum of ways and places where people use words in order to have an impact.

We know, and the lesson from James confirms it, that our words matter. When you buy a greeting card for someone, you may search for something that will have the impact you expect – feel better soon, have a great day, thank you, and/or something funny or sweet or formal. As a rule, the larger our audience, the greater care we should take with our words. So yes, teachers, preachers, other leaders. Yes, the recent debate between presidential candidates should be mentioned. The difference between the two was remarkable and memorable. Words can start fires as James says, can cause bomb threats in Springfield, Ohio, can cajole, or they can be used to build up a community. All of us are either tempted to fuel the fire that follows, whether it is by ridiculing or if it is by joining in the snarky world of commentary that’s everywhere. You and I aren’t presidential candidates but as parents, at our places of employment, with our spouses, our parents, aging relatives, we all speak words in settings that are just as important as a teacher or preacher or politician. In all cases, speaking clearly and kindly is the goal.

The general tone of public and private discourse in our country has changed dramatically in the last several years. When that happens, I don’t know about you, but it feels like the air we breathe has changed. The way I experience the world and therefore the way I respond to the world are not always what I would expect of myself. Here’s an example.

You have probably heard the story attributed to indigenous peoples, about the two wolves that live inside each of us. I won’t tell the whole story, but the gist is that we all have two wolves inside us that are always fighting. The one who wins the fight is the one that we feed. I am always tempted to feed the wrong wolf.

Because social media comes at us so fast and furious, I’m tempted to respond just as quickly to some random thing that pushes one of my buttons. Or I’m tempted, and do, repost something that is funny to me but just a little questionable. Sometimes this is a way to let off a little steam. The more I live in that world of quick words and impulsive statements though, the worse I feel. For a time, I committed to staying off social media before 12 noon and after 8pm. I started out my day better, and fell asleep with less anxiety. I needed to stop feeding the wrong wolf.

For all of us, it's not just social media, it could be watching too much news, or watching reality television or real life crime dramas, having a constant interest in tragedies, finding ourselves in the midst of drama more often. When our senses are constantly revved up, we start to feel like that’s normal. People are more tolerant of rudeness, people consider each other less, and people are less inhibited about being jerks in public. Even the baseball fans – Jorie and I went to a game a few weeks ago, and you know how there’s always “that one fan” somewhere in the stands? Well, he was sitting right behind us.

James words are a strong command to be participants in a religion that is pure and undefiled before God. In the context of James’ letter, the stakes are high. They’re high for us also and not only in places we consider important. Don’t forget about those every day moments when we’re not in church, we’re not in front of a group, we’re not feeling any pressure, when the temptation to speak without a filter is easier to give in to. Those everyday moments for example, especially when we are with those we love the most, Do you ever find yourself with your shoulders up or your jaw or neck tight, without realizing it? We need to take a moment now and then to lower our shoulders, relax our neck, relieve the tension that we might be holding.

James is reminding us always, to consider how our faith will guide our behavior. Today the behavior is our speech. We already know how words can harm. We know that words can also build up.

Don’t. Feed. The wrong wolf.

Let us pray..

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-09-09/james-31-12-4/>

Doug Bratt

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-james-31-12-6>

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