

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Words”

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James 3:1-12

³Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, 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 that it takes strong winds to drive them, 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 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 nature, 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 those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. 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.

There is a Yiddish folktale about a man who enjoyed gossip. His fascination with telling stories about other people even led him to telling untruths about the local rabbi. Finally feeling some guilt about what he had done, the man approached the rabbi whom he had dishonored. “I am sorry for what I have done, dear Rabbi. Please tell me how I might make amends.” The rabbi sighed and gave the instruction. “Take two pillows, go to the public square and cut them open. Wave them into the air. Then come back.” The man thought the request to be quite silly but he was so eager to make things right that he did just as the rabbi had told him. He went home, got two pillows and a knife, ran back to the public square, cut the pillows open, waved them into the air, and then hurried back to see the rabbi. He was very excited to tell the rabbi that he had completed the task required for forgiveness. “I did just what you told me to do, dear Rabbi.” The rabbi replied, “Good. Now to realize the harm your words have done, go back to the square and pick up every feather.” Of course it was an impossible task.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” We know that children’s chant well. And we also know that it isn’t true. Names may be words but words are extremely powerful. Words can hurt or heal. Words can tear down or build up. Words can comfort or bring fear.

There are lots of wars of words these days. Brooke Shields vs. Tom Cruise. MSNBC's Keith Olberman vs. FOX's Bill O'Reilly. Jon Stewart vs. Jim Cramer. Sarah Palin vs. David Letterman. Jon vs. Kate. Words of gossip about Hollywood celebrities fill the airwaves, internet, and magazine stands. Apparently we are all interested in what these people might be saying about one another. We keep people like Perez Hilton in business. To quote Oscar Wilde, "If you can't say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me."

The political war of words seemed to escalate during the health care debate. The town hall forums were full of people from both sides of the issue shouting each other down to the point where it became uncivil and frightening. It is not only the spoken word. Visit any message board on the internet, even one that represents churches and clergy and notice the mean-spirited banter that is thoughtlessly tossed about. Email and texting are wonderful things yet they have the potential to lead to hurt and misunderstanding. Consider the tragedy between teenagers in Wixom last week, an incident inflamed over words communicated by text messaging. If we use pen and paper, we might read over our words, edit them, hold them for a time, write a new draft or throw them away. But now our words are on their way before we even think about them. We live in an age of increased communication but so much of our life is communication that we sometimes neglect to consider the power of our words.

I confess that sometimes I am guilty of misusing the power of words. Usually without intention, I sometimes say something that will hurt another. I will speak without thinking of consequences. I will use words without considering their power. Like emptying a tube of toothpaste, things will come out of my mouth that I cannot place back inside. In reading the words of the epistle of James I pray I might be more sensitive to my speech and the power of my words.

The third chapter of James speaks about the power of the tongue. The author reminds us that the tongue is a small part of the body but it carries a great deal of importance. It has the potential to change the course upon which the rest of the body might be driven. It is like a fire, setting off the tiny spark that will soon develop into a blaze that consumes everything that stands in its way. While humans might successfully tame the wildest of animals and birds, James writes that nothing can tame the power of the tongue.

James' words seem harsh yet they are probably right on target. Who among us can say that they have never hurt another person with words? Who among us can say that they have never repeated something about another person that they did not know for certain was true? Who among us can say that they never participate in idle talk about other people and their lives?

In reflections on the subject Dan Clendenin writes, "with our words we name the world and each other, and at least in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality. Once our speech and our narratives take hold, they have a tremendous power and tenacity for good or evil. They can exclude or embrace, heal or humiliate, lift up or tear down. How many of us have internalized self-hatred that resulted from repeated criticisms from a parent? How many can still remember a compliment made by an elementary school teacher even though it was made decades ago? Or who has experienced the futile attempt of chronic over-compensation to prove your self-worth against school yard taunts?"

James' advice for us is to be consistent with our tongue and in the words we use. Hopefully we will choose to be consistent in our praise and uplifting. We will use our words for good. From the time of creation, God intended that we use our mouths for the praise of God, for the blessing of each other, and for the blessing of all of creation with words of healing and love. James indicates that speaking well of others bears good fruit in our actions. When we speak well of others we are more likely to treat others well. Such is the power of our words. James advice to the Christian community in a nutshell: Use your words to spread blessings-not anger, not anxiety, not gossip. Use your words to lift others up, not to bring others down so you might be elevated.

There is something about God's nature that enjoys praise and blessing. God needs it. God asks for it. God takes pleasure in it. And since we were all made in the image in God, there is something in our nature that enjoys praise and blessings from one another too. For that purpose, God has created the gift of words. Let us use that gift as God intends: to create beauty and blessing; to bring praise and thanksgiving; to build and uplift; to encourage and to find hope.