

Wrangling Over Words (James 3:1-12)
First Baptist Church, Jefferson City MO
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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Psalm 19; Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38)
September 12, 2021
WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/wrangling-over-words

James 3:1-12, The Message

Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.

A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!

It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women (God) made in (God's) image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?

You surely know this little ditty: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Countless generations have warded off childhood taunts with this childhood saying, but we all know it's just not true. This children's rhyme is used as a defense against name-calling and verbal bullying, intended to increase resiliency, avoid physical retaliation and

to remain calm. But the lines of this childhood chant carry their own contradiction because if words posed no threat, this saying wouldn't be necessary. It's no more than a pep talk to help us muster the inner strength to shield us from the hurt words do to us. The truth of the matter is that it's just the obvious: Words have the power to wound and cripple us.

The third chapter of James is a smorgasbord of visual images that illustrate the power of words: It's about bridles and horse's bits, rudders that steer ships, sparks that ignite massive forest fires, and the irony of our ability to train animals to do almost anything, and our inability to tame our own tongues. It's about tongues that both bless and curse, like springs that gush both fresh and bitter water, and the plainspoken logic of fig trees that only bear figs and sea water that's always salty and never fresh.

It's important we realize words lie at the base of most of what happens in the world. Words make things happen! Sometimes it's the simplest of words that cause the most dramatic changes in things. Simple words like, "You're not pretty" or "I hate you" or "You're the most wonderful thing to ever happen to me!" The Bible tells us words have meaning and things happen as a result of them.

The first words of Genesis tell us that *out of nothingness God spoke the world into being*. The ancient Hebrews regarded every guttural sound in utterly concrete terms. They believed that to speak a word was to create a unit of energy with its own power that is once said is then set loose in the world. Once a sound was uttered, the Hebrews felt it became its own entity much like an arrow shot from a bow and released on its way. Remember the words from Isaiah's prophecy, "*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the things for which I sent it.*" (Isa. 55:11) In Genesis, words are the medium of creative activity. Things happen as a result of God speaking!

While it's true our words are made by the passing of breath over our larynx and then shaped by our jaws and tongues and lips to form sounds that create what we hear as words, they are much more than that.

The words that come out of our mouths open the windows of understanding of who we are. It's from one's words people know whether you are a person others can trust or whether you are someone to avoid because they can't trust what you said. You know the line ... how do we know he's lying? His lips are moving. Out of the same mouth, words are formed that either bless or curse others.

I wrote this week for our Friday E-blast about the day a woman came to Francis of Assisi in deep distress. She confessed she had intentionally circulated a false rumor about one of her neighbors and was now troubled about it. She asked, "Is there any way I can undo what I have

done and make up for this offense?" Without saying a word, Francis took a feather pillow and slashed it with a knife and shook out the contents into the currents of the wind. Then he turned to the woman and said, "Go and collect all the feathers and bring them back to me." She tried to gather them for a while, but soon returned in dismay, crying, "It's impossible, they are scattered to the four winds." To which Francis answered, "Neither can you recall the words you have spoken. They, like the feathers, are now scattered beyond your control."¹ With our words, we have the power of weapons of mass destruction. God said a few simple words and the universe was created and sustained. When we speak, we have the power to create great beauty or we have the power to destroy lives.

In our lifetimes, the word in its oral and written forms has gone digital as electronic impulses form images and connections in mind-bending ways. Something James could not have anticipated, social media has come into being and the whole world has changed. Facebook was created in a dorm room at Harvard 17 years ago and 2.8 billion of the world's population are now connected. The various platforms of social media create forums that bring people to exchange ideas, connect with, relate to, and mobilize for a shared cause. But ironically, social media is quickly "turning us into the most antisocial generation" in history.²

Writer Jonathan Safran Foer observed, "Each step forward in social media has made it easier, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than (our) humanity."³

A century ago, a phone call made it easier than physically showing up on someone's doorstep to have a face-to-face conversation. Decades later, technology moved us further down this path as we found it preferable to leave someone a voice message rather than talking on the phone. Quick and easy with no counter-arguments to muddy the waters. (That's why we call when we know no one is there to pick up.) Foer believes "the closer the world gets to our fingertips, the farther it gets from our hearts."⁴

Is that descriptive of what's going on in our many worlds, and in our relationships with those around us with whom we share life? While the emergence of a digital world has done so much to bring us together, it's also been a shadowy world where digital bullying can occur, where depression and anxiety are heightened, and where all kinds of criminals, predators, and terrorists lurk. Social media as a tool can help create community where like-minded persons find one another. It can be a place where students may grow by learning to collaborate in learning groups outside of class.

1 John Claypool, "The Power of the Word," 1978

2 Jacob Amedie, "The Impact of Social Media on Society," Santa Clara University, 9/3/15
https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.searchencrypt.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1002&context=enql_176

3 Jonathan Safran Foer, "How Not to be Alone," New York Times, 6/8/13

4 Foer, *Ibid.*

So, what might first-century James have to say to us in the twenty-first-century? James might say, “Be bold in unloosing the gifts of the future with your words! Be generous in your praise and resilient in your patience. It takes time for a new generation to step forward to fill the roles of leadership for this church! Don’t be shy about giving them your blessing.” James might also remind us that our words have great leverage power in enabling the younger members of the church to move forward knowing they are called by God to lead.

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