

Stop. Think. Think Some More. Then Speak.
The United Church of Broomfield
September 12, 2021

James 3:1-12

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For 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. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or 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. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And 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. 7 For every species of beast and bird, reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, *this ought not to be so*. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

As children, I'm sure that you heard from your parents, the expression, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Generally, this was a welcome comment that brought significant comfort, especially after the callous and thoughtless words of a friend or classmate hurt us. As children this expression works well and alleviates many problems, but as we mature, we begin to see that this catchy phrase really does not help, for it simply does not apply. The reality is that words can be very hurtful and damaging. They might not hurt us physically as a blow to the body, but they can be even more destructive for their damage does not generally heal as rapidly and as well as wounds we can readily see. The power of words is real and, thus, their use must be recognized and guarded appropriately.

There are numerous examples in history of how words have been effectively utilized to aid, encourage, and inspire, both individuals and groups. On November 19, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln spoke at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery, he finished his remarks with words that have echoed and been memorized by school-age children since that time: "That government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln's words have been the source of inspiration not only for Americans, but all people who seek freedom. Some seventy years later, another president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, uplifted the American people during the Great Depression by stating, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." He went on to articulate his four freedoms: freedom of speech and worship, and freedom from want and fear. He called upon Americans to unite for the common cause and good of all.

In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, challenged Americans: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Volunteerism in programs such as the Peace Corps and many other civil and religious groups, seeking to aid those less fortunate, sprang up and gave people reason for hope. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in probably his most famous speech, told those assembled during the "March on Washington:" "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a

nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." King dreamed of a society where people would live in an ecumenical spirit of harmony with one another. His words gave inspiration to those associated with the American Civil Rights Movement.

The positive and uplifting use of words has been equaled, unfortunately, with many examples of the destructive use of rhetoric and language. The Ku Klux Klan preached hatred, racism, and religious intolerance against all who were not white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant during its heyday in the 1920s. Adolf Hitler proclaimed death to Jews, leading to the great genocide of the Holocaust. Our contemporary scene continues to experience hate-filled speech between Muslims, Jews, and Christians and even nasty and often "below the belt" and viscous verbal jabs in political campaigns. Playing by the rules of decorum no longer seems applicable. In order to get ahead the rule is not to promote your own initiatives but to downplay what others are suggesting; lying and spreading misinformation is becoming far too acceptable and commonplace.

Unquestionably, words have been used to inspire, rally, and produce the very best in human society, but they have equally been used to tear down and destroy, bringing great harm to individuals and groups. We need to learn how to use words wisely and constructively to build up and enhance our society.

James warns us today of the care that is needed in our use of words. He begins his lesson by speaking of the significant and great responsibility of being a good teacher. He suggests that not many should be teachers, but this in only in a formal sense, for all of us are teachers in significant ways in the varied aspects of our lives. Parents, as we know, are the primary teachers of their children in every aspect of their lives. From learning to tie your shoes, to riding a bike, to how to conduct yourself in public, to the important lessons of our faith, parents are the frontline soldiers as our teachers.

As teachers, as humans, we will make mistakes; this we know for certain, but it must be a great consolation to hear James say it. Thus, while we know, all too well at times, of our own failures and inadequacies, we must realize that God understands. After all, God made us – perfectly imperfect. All God asks of us is our best effort. Still, James reminds us, that as those who choose to follow Christ's path, God has called us to a higher standard, a Christian life. Our road will encounter some detours, potholes, and roadblocks, but then God never promised us a smooth path to eternal life. In fact, Jesus is very clear in the Gospel: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24b-25).

James then gets into the heart of his message on the importance of the tongue to the body. Using the power and grandeur of a horse and a ship as examples, James demonstrates how the tongue can control the whole body. As a bit guides a powerful horse and a small rudder directs a large ship, so the tongue, seemingly so insignificant, directs a human by the words one uses.

We have the ability to subdue all things; the created world has been made subject to humanity. All is subject to us, that is, except the tongue. James calls it "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." He tells us that with the same tongue we praise God and also curse God's people. We know all too well the reality of this statement. We gather together today in praise and worship of God. We use many words, all of which in some way are articulated to bring something positive to God's people. Yet, if we are not careful, before the day has ended, we will use the same tongue with which we utter praise - to be the vehicle that speaks ill of others, especially behind their backs or on social media, where it is easy, convenient, and "safe." Unfortunately, this is a common failure in which we all participate. The apostle suggests, however, that this reality doesn't have to be. He provides examples from nature that show that the tongue need not participate in both good and evil. He says a spring does not yield both fresh and brackish water nor does a fig tree yield olives nor a grapevine figs.

The challenge of James' words is highly significant. The laws of nature govern the reality that apple trees do not yield grapes nor do seeds for squash yield carrots, but the tongue is under our control; it is not governed by the laws of nature. Personal choice, one of the two ideas (along with the ability to think) that separates humankind from the rest of God's creation, is operative with the tongue. We must choose to use the tongue to build up, praise, and challenge, rather than ridicule or condemn. Thus, the choice is ours. The choice is always ours!

A teacher was said to have written in huge block letters at the top of the blackboard, "Engage mind before putting mouth in gear." In other words, ***think before you speak***. These words of wisdom, surely inspired by James, should be heeded by all. We all tend to be impulsive. We use words to get our way and to get it now, not in a few days or even a few minutes. When things don't happen as we think or the schedule we have set, we lash out, often at others who have absolutely nothing to do with things for which we give them responsibility. We all have a tendency as well to react, often harshly, especially when someone speaks ill of us or is less than positive. We are all defensive at time. It is natural for us to "circle the wagons" and create a defensive shield around ourselves when we believe we are being attacked. Even when we know in our hearts that what the other person is saying may be true, we do not want to admit it. We defend ourselves, often with significant barbs for the person who we perceive is attacking our person. We simply cannot allow what others say to go without our response.

Words are easy to use — as the expression says, "talk is cheap." Yet, in the end, words can be very expensive and cost us dearly. When loose and thoughtless words, often expressed without engaging our minds, reach unintended ears, we pay a heavy price. We may only receive a lecture or a reprimand for our casual use of speech. We could, however, lose a friendship or our job. Social media is ablaze now a days with videos, memes and stories of people losing their positions in companies because of spewing hateful and racist words. Thus, we must always be mindful that while words are free, their use must be tightly controlled.

Jesus provided the best examples of how to properly use our tongues. The Lord used his tongue wisely to instruct. The Gospels are filled with examples of how Jesus taught his disciples and even those who were allied against him, the Scribes and Pharisees, what was necessary to gain the eternal life of God. Jesus spoke directly in the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5-7), and metaphorically through the use of parables, stories which are timeless for all peoples. Jesus used words to praise. The Lord praised the widow who contributed to the collection only a few pennies, but it was all she had for her livelihood (Mark 12:43-44). He congratulated Mary of Bethany for her wisdom in choosing to sit at his feet and listen to his words (Luke 10:41-42). Jesus used words to console the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17) and to bring hope to the centurion whose servant was sick (Mark 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) and to the blind man at Jericho (Luke 18:35-43). Jesus used words to forgive the penitent thief, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43), and the woman caught in the act of adultery: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11b). Christ also used words when appropriate to challenge. His parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) challenged Jewish officials on who they considered their neighbor. He used strong language, even to the point of losing a part of our body (Matthew 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-48), to suggest that nothing must interfere with our relationship with God. Jesus even used rather harsh words to speak of the future and the division his reign would bring (Matthew 10:34-39; Luke 12:49-53).

Jesus did not always use words to praise, but they were always directed in positive ways, to right the ships of others, spiritually and socially, and guide them toward more calm waters. The Lord used words to assist people toward the one and only goal that has ultimate meaning — our eternal life with God.

In our lives we want to change the world and change others, but we need to control ourselves first. The Indian Jesuit and spiritual writer, Anthony de Mello, tells of a Sufi Bayazid who once commented about himself: I was a revolutionary when I was young and my single prayer to God was, "Lord, give me the energy to change the world." As I approached middle-age and realized that half my life was gone without my changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to, "Lord give me the grace to change all those with whom I come in contact. If I can change my family and friends I will be satisfied." Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, my one prayer is, "Lord, give me the grace to change myself." If I had prayed for this at the outset, I should not have wasted my life.

Words truly are an important element in our lives. We speak casually; we speak seriously. We joke with others and we bring challenges. Yet, in all that we say there is a need to think seriously about what we say before we say it. Too often we hear people say, "Oh, I wish I had not said that," or "I should have said something." In short, we need to think about what we say. We must follow the lead of Jesus and use words in ways that instruct, praise, forgive, and when necessary, challenge and admonish. Let us do our best to tame our tongues. Let us make sure to remember, "engage mind before putting mouth in gear!"

AMEN