

“Watch What You Say!”

James 3:1-12

A boy answered a knock on the door one day to find his grandmother from his mother side who gleefully greets him with “Surprise! I’m here to visit my handsome grandson!” And the boy replied, “Hello grandma! Let me see if Dad will do what he said.” The grandmother curious about that statement asked, “And what would that be?” The boy smiled and replied “Dad said he will run around naked if you ever visit us!” Watch what you say!

When the great painter Benjamin West was a young boy he decided to draw a picture of his sister. He got out bottles of ink and succeeded in making a mess. When his mother got home she said, “Wow! What a beautiful picture,” and kissed him. Later in life he said, “Those words and kiss made me a painter.” Watch what you say!

Our text today from the book of James has a subheading of “taming the tongue” and points directly to another issue in his congregation that pertains to teachers. It seemed obvious to me that he is talking about the teachers in his community: a pastor, an elder, a church leader, or those who teach students like a rabbi. “Not many of you should become teachers” James says, “for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness”. James included himself as a teacher. He declares that the gift of speech is a Christian practice that must be taken seriously. Thus, he wrote about the importance of taming the tongue. For James, words are powerful. Words have the power to bless, to curse, to inflict pain, to appreciate, to put down others, to express emotions. Virtually every human emotion can be triggered with the right or wrong words. When someone describes a beautiful flower for instance, a picture and a feeling are created in your mind. The words enable you to make meaning. When a parent reacts to a child's singing or drawing, meaning is created between child and parent, meaning which can affect the child's self-concept for a lifetime. This power to affect one another is serious business. Our spoken words shape the reality of those with whom we interact. (Dr. Lori Carrell)

At Tuesday’s lectionary group, Lynne Fox shared a poignant illustration of how words can either build up or put down. She shared what happened to plants when you talk to them. An experiment was done with two similar plants. Both were watered, given attention, enough sunlight and proper care. One plant was praised and appreciated constantly saying how beautiful the leaves and flowers are, how it gives joy and how it makes people happy – that sort

of thing. The other plant on the other hand was bombarded with negative words. You are ugly – you smell bad- I don't like the way your leaves open and so on. The result according to Lynne was incredible. The plant showered with good positive words flourished and thrived with luscious green leaves and colourful blooms while the one that was put down with negative words shrunk and shriveled. To paraphrase Patrick Rothfuss: *“Words can light fires in the mind. Words can wring tears from the hardest hearts.”*

Lynn's story reminds me of how we raise our children too. The writer of Proverbs was not mistaken when these words were written: “Point your kids in the right direction—when they're old they won't be lost.” As a teacher, these words of wisdom from Dorothy Law Nolte was an inspiration. She wrote this poem whom she titled: Children Learn What They Live and I'm going to share an excerpt of that poem:

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.

If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.

If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.

If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.

If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.

James warned people to tame the tongue. According to research, “the average human tongue is 4 inches long. It has 8 muscles in it and weighs only 2 ½ ounces. Yet, this small part of the body can get us in a lot of trouble. The average person speaks 11 million words a year. Do you know how many words that is in a lifetime? At the age of 65 it is 715 million words.” But watch what you say! There is a famous English rhyme used in the playground that goes like this: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” The rhyme persuades the child victim of name-calling or bullying to ignore the taunt, to refrain from

physical retaliation, and to remain calm and not to fight back. I'm sure you never believed that rhyme. When other people stabbed you with their sharp tongues, it hurt deeply. Words hurt. Most of us have felt the sting of a harsh tongue. Words are powerful. They have the power to hurt or heal, to build up or tear down. The apostle James wouldn't have believed that old saying about sticks and stones and words. He knew that the tongue is an instrument of incredible power.

I read a story of two altar boys. One accidentally dropped the jug of wine during the Sunday mass. The village priest struck him on the face and said, "You have embarrassed all of us. Don't ever come back to be an altar boy again." The boy never did come back. The boy became Tito, the Communist dictator. In another church there was an altar boy serving on another Sunday Mass. And he also spilled wine and it went everywhere. And with a warm twinkle in his eyes the bishop gently whispered to the young boy, "Someday you're going to be a good priest. It's ok to be nervous at the holy mysteries." That boy was Fulton Sheen. Later Archbishop Fulton Sheen, one of the most charismatic Christian leaders in America.

James reminds us to be mindful of the tongue because it is powerful, it is dangerous, it is hard to control and it is easily corrupted. The tongue is connected to our brain and the heart. In a recent essay, the scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann asks, "Is free speech a license to destroy or a responsibility to build up?" He points out that the Epistle of James is written as a reminder about the importance of Israel's roots, the importance of their covenantal, prophetic tradition going back to the ninth commandment that says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." The Jewish people believe in the power of "dabar" which is the Hebrew word for "words". "Any falsehood uttered in the community damages the neighbour and diminishes the neighbourhood," Brueggemann says, "because real community depends on reliable truth-telling." We who wake up in the morning with our mind stayed on positive thoughts can keep our minds on positivity by choosing our words wisely, by saying things that build up and that don't tear down. We who walk in the Way of Christ need to be mindful of the power of speech, because our families, our neighbours, the members of our social community, this congregation are affected by that speech. And when any member of our community is burned by our words, then the neighbourhood that we share is diminished.

A story was told when John Wesley, the founder of Methodism was preaching. He was wearing a new bow tie with two streamers hanging down from it. There was a woman in the meeting who sat with a long face and heard nothing but paid attention those two streamers. When the service was over she went up and said, "Pardon me, Mr. Wesley, will you suffer a little criticism?" "Yes," replied Mr. Wesley. "Well," she said, "Mr. Wesley, your bow tie is too long and it is an offense to me. Have you a pair of shears?" After receiving the shears from Mr. Wesley, she reached over and clipped off the streamers. Then he said, "Is that all right now?" "Yes, that is much better." She replied. Then John Wesley said, "Do you mind letting me have those shears? Would you mind a little criticism? Your tongue is a great offense to me. Please stick it out while I take some off." Of course, the woman got upset! Watch what you say! There is life and death in the power of words. Your encouraging words can lift someone up and help them make it through the day. Your destructive words can cause deep wounds; they may be the weapons that destroy someone's desire to continue trying. If you have words of kindness, praise or encouragement -- speak them with grace. Listen to your heart and respond. Someone, somewhere, is waiting for those words.

Friends, I leave you these words from a book called Our Pentecostal Boys and Girls:

“Only a word of anger, But it wounded one sensitive heart;
Only a word of sharp reproach, But it made the teardrops start;
Only a hasty, thoughtless word, Sarcastic and unkind.
But it darkened the day before so bright, And left a sting behind.
Only a word of kindness, But it lightened one heart of its grief;
Only a word of sympathy, But it brought one soul relief;
Only a word of gentle cheer. But it flooded with radiant light
The pathway that seemed so dark before, And it made the day more bright.”
Watch what you say! Amen.