

James 3:1-12 Pastor Bill Uetricht 9/16/18 17 Pentecost

I have confessed this many times before to you, but I will do so again. I am pathetic when it comes to anything practical. I can think with the best of them but to figure out how to fix a vacuum cleaner or put together some toy or some new product that we have bought, well, forget it. We have many members who are so good at those kinds of things. They amaze me. I used to be jealous of them, but at some point I discerned that we all don't get all the gifts. And what's more, if you figure out how to do these practical things (make coffee), then you might actually have to do them. At my core, I am lazy!

I went through some of my huge collection of sermons this past week in preparation for this particular sermon, and I discovered that I really have preached very few on the Book of James. For me, this book, a lot like the book of Proverbs, sounds like the advice of a well-meaning parent. You know, make sure you wear clean underwear in case you are in an accident, put the toilet seat down, and squeeze the toothpaste from the bottom. For me, sometimes James is just too cliché-ish, too practical. And again, practical stuff is not always my gig. But at some point, I guess, you probably need to learn to make the coffee. At some point, faith has got to become action, deeds, behavior, a matter of practicality.

James will not let you not be practical. And today James will not let you escape reflecting on this thing right here—something he compares to a rudder on a boat and a small fire. For most of us, the tongue is as important as just about anything in or on our body. It's a small member, James says, but "it can boast of great exploits." The tongue is a matter of great practicality.

Now James starts his discussion of the tongue by telling his audience that not many of them (us) should become teachers. Why? Because teachers "will be judged with greater strictness." Literally, the Greek says, "Do not become many teachers." That is, don't turn your community into one that thinks you all can or should teach. Teaching,

because it assumes power and authority, has a special burden placed upon it. Teachers are often emulated. Those in leadership positions have a special responsibility to tame the tongue because what they have to say can shape people for the rest of their lives, can form the generations to come. For James, teachers or those in leadership can't just say whatever comes to their minds. Discipline of the tongue is needed for leaders.

Now trust me. I, as a leader, know how difficult this is. Sometimes I just want to say whatever comes to my mind. She's just an idiot. He's just stupid. Sometimes I will be asked in a public environment to comment about a person who is known in the community or the culture, and initially, I would just like to express my opinion. And sometimes I do, and occasionally that is the right move. But generally, I do better when I weigh my words, not because I don't want to be honest, but because I recognize that my words have power. As a teacher, a leader, I can't just say whatever I darn well please. I can't post on Facebook or Tweet whatever pops into my little brain.

Perhaps you can see why not all of us should become teachers; teachers, leaders, will be judged with greater strictness. Oh yes, "we all, including all teachers, make mistakes," James says. And perhaps he is saying that we who are prone to making lots of mistakes with our tongues ought to stay away from teaching because, again, our authority and power can shape so many people.

Now some folks argue that what James has to say about the tongue is for the most part addressed simply to teachers and folks in authority, which may cause you to say that perhaps his words don't need to apply to you, since you might not consider yourself a teacher or a leader. Nice try! I don't think you can get off that easy!!

I don't know if this is true or not, but I thought that Dolores Brondyke, one of our members, was quite profound in her argument at Bible study this past week that often when people write things or speak things they speak or write about people other than you so that you won't get defensive right off the bat and, therefore, not listen to or

read further what they are arguing. In other words, we seem to handle things better when we think that it is someone else who has the problem. Ya, those teachers, they should be watching their tongues. Those leaders should be watching what they put on Facebook or Twitter.

Ya, they should. They have the ability to shape so much and so many people by what they have to say or write. But so do you. *Your* tongue is a small member, but it can boast of great exploits. *Your* tongue is a small fire that can set ablaze a whole forest. *Your* tongue can stain the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature. *Your* tongue can be set on fire by hell, literally gehenna, the fire that burned the garbage outside of the city. In other words, *your* tongue can get some really bad stuff going.

*Your* tongue can tear down your kids, sometimes affecting them for the rest of their lives. *Your* tongue can ruin relationships for a life time. *Your* tongue can create all kinds of defensiveness and argumentation in your marriage. Pretty soon you are arguing about all kinds of stuff that you weren't arguing about when you began. Tongues create slippery slopes. And they say things that you didn't mean to say. They paint pictures that you didn't mean to paint. They create realities that you didn't mean to create.

The other night I was talking with a couple of pastor friends at a social gathering where, truthfully, our tongues got a little out of control. We were speaking about a colleague of ours, who truly is a pain, who honestly doesn't know how to control *his* tongue, saying some less than helpful and very self-preoccupied things. Well, the speaking ended up turning this colleague into a butt of our jokes, a victim of our laughter. Now honestly, I don't like this guy, but I have to say that the next day, as I was riding my bike, I began feeling a bit dirty, unclean. My tongue had led me and *us* down a path that I wasn't proud of. James is right: "every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

The tongue can take control of us and can lead us to places we didn't mean to go.

With the tongue, on the one hand, we bless God. With this little member of my body I have built all kinds of people up. I have affirmed all kinds of folks, taking them to places that they thought they never could go. With this tongue, I have helped to build communities of affirmation, communities where people thrive, grow and become leaders. And with this tongue, I have also cursed other people, torn them down, diminished their reputation in a community.

But I got to get his. You go to get this. This ought not be so! The people you curse, James says, are people made in the image and likeness of God. The first thing said about people in the Bible is not that they are all messed up, something that the Bible gets to eventually, but that they are made in the image of God. The first thing the Bible says about our humanity is that it is good. Now this is not to suggest that sometimes we don't have to call people to account for their bad behavior; we do. But the first assumption that we have about people is that they are children of God. Before we say that they are messed up, we say that are created in God's image. How we speak to them and about them flows from an understanding that we together are created good! The people you don't agree with politically are made in the image of God. The family members who have indeed hurt you are made the image of God. The folks you work with and the church members who really get on your nerves are made in the image of God.

So watch how you talk to them and about them. We are what we communicate. We wouldn't want brackish water to come out of the same source from which we get clean, fresh, spring water, would we? We don't expect figs to come from olive trees, tomatoes from grapevines, do we? Of course not! So why would we, children of God, who are made in the image of God, allow our tongues to pollute the universe. It's duplicitous, not in keeping with who we are. We would be living a lie.

I think James would want us to know that growing up in the faith, Christian maturity, actually takes us back to the beginning, back to the good work that God did in creation. We all are made in the likeness of God. So watch your tongue. It's really a great gift. Make sure you use it to include, not exclude; heal, not humiliate; lift up, not tear down.