

Talking About God
James 3:1-12
September 16, 2018 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today, we continue our study of the Epistle of James. In the way of review, tradition tells us that this letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus and the head of the Christian church in Jerusalem; and, this letter is, in many ways, a guide for Christian living. But today's reading begins with a scary statement from those of us who are teachers. Wendy, our Christian Ed. Director, certainly does not want to hear James admonition, and perhaps it's not the best reading for the Sunday in which we commission our Sunday School Teachers. James says, "Not many of you should become teachers." James goes on to explain that those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. Those who teach will be held to a higher standard.

Now, many of you know that I love to teach. I spent the first three years of my working life teaching public school instrumental music. I have taught all levels of First Aid and CPR for both the American Red Cross and the National Ski Patrol. I have taught various religion classes both in the church and the university; and I continue to teach regular classes here at the church. But, having said all that, I tell you that I agree with James. Teachers have influence over those they teach; and teachers ought rightly set an example for their students – a positive example.

I will never forget teaching middle school music, and having some students come to me to ask me about the affair going on between two other teachers, both of whom were married. Sadly, these teachers were so blatant about their relationship, that I could not deny it. Still, I was happy that the students came to me, so we could discuss the situation, the inappropriate behavior, and the importance of faithfulness in marriage. It was a real challenge for me to have this discussion and explain that, while the behavior of the teachers was inappropriate, they still deserved their students' respect, at least on an academic level. Now, of course, there is never an excuse for being unfaithful to one's spouse or violating one's marriage vows; but, truly I tell you, "Yes. These teachers should be held to a higher standard than the general public." Teachers are charged with setting an example for their students.

Having said all this, I do note that James, immediately follows his warning to teachers by saying that all of us make many mistakes. James does seem to allow for our human frailties. It was the Apostle Paul who noted, that "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) Indeed, we are all human; we all make mistakes; and we give thanks for a merciful and forgiving God.

It is, at this point, that James enters into a series of metaphors about the tongue. You may remember two weeks ago, when we began our journey through James, we read that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. Here James goes further in the admonition to control the tongue. Here, it becomes very clear that James sees the tongue as both a blessing and a curse.

The tongue, and language in general, is a huge blessing. How could we teach without language? How can we learn without language? Indeed, part of the reason I love to teach is that I love to learn; and, as most teachers will tell you, if you really want to learn something, teach it. The musician in me asks, “How can we sing without words?” The preacher in me asks, “How can we praise God without words? How can we pray without words? And maybe most importantly, how do we tell others of the amazing love of God without words?” Indeed, words are a huge blessing.

I love language. I have studied, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and German. I’m not particularly good at any of them. Language is a struggle for me. In High School, I was generally a good student until it came to spelling tests which I repeatedly flunked. But I still love language, and I enjoy reading works in their original language. Maybe it’s just because I enjoy learning. Maybe it’s because I enjoy a good challenge. But, yes, I find language, words, speaking, singing, praying, sharing the love of God, sharing the love I have for others – all of it is a blessing.

However, the tongue and its language, can also be a huge curse. We all grew up with the saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” To that I say, “Bologna!” Names hurt. Names leave a lasting wound. More damage can be done by words than by many actions. How much damage has been done by gossip, by slander, by general disrespect. How much damage is done by lies and innuendo’s. I’m told that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had one rule for the community of his underground seminary students in Finkenwald: No one was allowed to speak about another student in their absence. How much better, how much friendlier, how much more loving would our world be, if we could follow that rule.

But the curses of the tongue are not just about language against another. How often we present pat answers to various situations, answers that leave little room for further questions. And, yes, teacher can be guilty of this, and yes, preachers can be guilty of this, and yes, politician can be especially guilty of this. How often are we so busy purporting our own viewpoints that we forget to listen to others. (Remember two weeks ago, “Be quick to listen and slow to speak!”) How often do we choose to converse only with those who think as we do and speak as we do? We do not search out those of differing opinions. (I certainly note that I have some pretty strong opinions about certain social and environmental and economic issues. Those of you who know me, know that to be the case. But I pray that I always maintain an open mind and that I am always ready to listen, truly listen, actively listen to those of differing opinions. Yes, I celebrate diversity, and that includes diversity of opinion. I welcome conversations about such issues.)

Finally, I’ve said it before, and I say it again. I am distressed by the deterioration of our everyday language. Profanity has become common place in our society. One cannot go to a movie, particularly if it has a serious, adult theme, without listening to a significant amount of vulgar profanity. I generally try to

avoid such profanity, not because I'm a minister; but, because I don't like my thoughts running in those directions. I have noted before that I once had a summer job where such language was common among the assembly line workers. While I never used such language, by the end of summer, I found myself thinking in that language; and it took some time to "cleansing my mind" of profanity.

Indeed, the tongue is both a blessing and a curse, and so we look to Christ to lead us, to lead our thoughts and our words as well as our actions. We look to the Spirit of the risen Christ to guide our tongues as the bridle guides the horse or the rudder guides the ship. But I would be remiss if I did not once again recognize the value of silence. I have sometimes conducted Taizé worship services with significant time for silence – time for silent prayers of several minutes in length. Yes, when you're sitting in church, three or four minutes of silence can be a long time; but, you see, it's not just silence, it's an invitation to speak and more importantly to listen to God. It's an invitation to let the Holy Spirit speak to us, as we simply sit quietly for three or four minutes. I have a friend who is a Quaker. The true Quaker worship service starts with a long time of silence, before someone feels moved to offer prayer or reflection or meditation.. As it's been explained to me, "We invite the Spirit to speak out of the silence. I like that." Silence is a gift, all too often forgotten. And so, today's lesson from James – Choose our words carefully; be sure to use our words as a blessing, and not as a curse; and take some time for silence. Find comfort in silence. Embrace the silence.

Last week, I spoke about models of Christian living, models that would fit the life purported by James. One of those models was Saint Francis of Assisi. It was Francis that said, "Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary use words." What' Francis saying? We should reflect the Good News of Christ in our actions and in our very lives; but sometimes, we also need to use the gifts of language to share that Good News.

Thanks be to God for the gift of language. May God guide us that we might always use that gift for the furtherance of God's kingdom here on the earth.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Speak to us in the silence.
Speak to us that we might then speak to others
of your amazing love.
Let our words. always be acceptable to you,
for you are our rock and our redeemer.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
North Olmsted United Methodist Church