

SERMON – “WORDS THAT HURT, WORDS THAT HEAL”

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 3: 1-12

Review what James had to say

James does not mince words when it comes to teaching us about the power of our tongues! It’s a power that can be used for good and can be used for harm. We’ll get to that subject in a moment, but first a little introduction to the Letter of James.

James falls into the category of “wisdom literature” – Just like Proverbs. It is not like the letters of Paul which were far more developed into theological themes, addressing specific concerns of the early church. James, instead, seeks to impart some moral and ethical teaching about how to live out the Christian faith. His focus is less on what one believes about Jesus, and more on how one acts. There are a lot of pithy “one liners” throughout the letter, very much in the style of wisdom literature.

That being said: James comes back to the power of what we say and how we say it over and over again, and going back to the 19th verse of Chapter one, he urges the believer to “quick to listen, be slow to speak, slow to anger”... and “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls”.

But be doers of the word, not just hearers.

“If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.”

So now we come to the third chapter. James uses three metaphors to describe the power of the tongue:

A bridle, a tiller, and a match: The tongue is like all three: small but mighty in power:

I read a quote from a Rabbi, Yehuda Berg, that, I think speaks volumes to the power of our words:

“Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate, and to humble.

Are you as outraged as I am with the public use of hateful, belittling language that has become the norm rather than the exception. I definitely want to pass out bridles. In our current age of public and social media, it has become the currency of choice. Putting someone down seems to make one feel more powerful. It is becoming our societal downfall at all levels.

It’s happening in our schools: of course, it has always been there: we all had our favorite taunts and putdowns, our labels for people we didn’t like or were threatened by or didn’t understand. We hoped they would hurt the person addressed, but I think we had less understanding about how those taunts affected a whole other group of people, even in our small circle of influence.

But the expansion into social media, cyber-bullying in particular, has unleashed such a hateful power over young lives. Whenever, I read of another suicide because a young child or teen has been so verbally abused that they have taken their lives, I weep not only for that child, but for the whole society that has allowed that to happen.

Where does this hateful language come from?

In 1949, Rogers and Hammerstein risked the entire production of "South Pacific" with this song:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear

You've got to be taught from year to year

It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear

You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made and people whose skin is a different shade. You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before its too late. Before you are six or seven or eight. To hate all the people your relatives hate. You've got to be carefully taught.

R and H wrote that in 1949. I was less than a year old. But I saw South Pacific as a child, and I remember those words. There was still so little I was conscious of. I wasn't conscious of our village that just had a very small black population and how isolated the few black children felt. I wasn't conscious of the club that my family belonged to that had barred Jewish persons from membership. I was conscious of the moment that I brought a black boy who had become my friend in the workplace when I was 16, and my parents being "concerned". Their open rhetoric in the home was being challenged.

Racist rhetoric has escalated. We know that, but how have we addressed it?

What I've learned, however, it isn't the blatant racism coming from perhaps a fringe group that has built the walls of division. Closer to home, I want to address what it is that we might be saying with our own words or lack of words. As a white woman, I discover every day, that speaking from my position of privilege can be building walls I am not even aware of. I must be honest. I don't want to claim the title of white racist, but I know I must. We are all affected by the system we have been party to. I've lived out of the privilege of not being avoided when I walk down the street; that I will not be confronted by police or ignored by a taxi driver because of the color of my skin; that my nieces and nephews didn't have to hear the "talk" about how to stay safe.

In her book "It's the Little Things", Lena Williams writes that it's not the blatant racist rants that come between most of us of different races, it is the presumptions or the lack of understanding that systematic white privilege has deeply adversely affected the life of every black American.

The words that hurt most might be the "well -meaning words" like "I don't see color, I see people as people". How offensive! Such a statement takes away such a vital part of a person's identity. Removing race from the equation might seem like a noble gesture, but it is not.

So it isn't just the blatant rants meant to hurt, it is the subtle presumptions and even ignorance that are most destructive.

It is time for honest conversation about what our words convey.

**What are we teaching with our words or with our lack of words?
What are we saying to each other and how are we saying it?**

How easy it is for a simple word to slip off the tongue and hurt? How easy it is, then for that wound to infect us so that we want to hurt back. I imagine that I am not alone in holding on to memories of single words that cut through me as a child or as an adult.

I am a great Tennis fan. Two years ago I watched the US OPEN final between Naomi Osaka and Serina Williams. In the midst of that was an exchange of words that speaks to exactly what I am talking about today. The exchange between Serina Williams and Carlos Ramos, the umpire. It spoke to me about how quickly a hurtful exchange escalates and if often, so much more that just about the moments interaction.

Carlos Ramos gave Serina a warning because he saw a coaching signal from Serina's coach. What it triggered in Serina was that she heard that Ramos was calling her a "cheat". The second step in the escalation came when Serina broke a racquet in frustration. A point was taken away. Serina is even more hurt because she believes that she is being treated unfairly (and not without reason). She can't bridle the anger, and neither can Ramos – she called him a thief and he penalized her a game (unheard of in a championship match). That gave her opponent, Naomi Osaka, the opportunity to serve for the match and she won. There has been much commentary about this interchange and I won't go there. But it serves as an example of what happens in our lives when the heat of moment sends us into a tailspin of conflict and hurt.

There were healing words that day as well, as Serina comforted the young player whose victory was tainted by these events out of her control and she had played an incredible match. Serina stopped the crowd from booing and praised her opponent. I don't know if she and Carlos Ramos ever had a healing conversation.

Moving from hurt to healing is another sermon (or 10 sermons). It is often a long journey. I know there are conversations that I have never had in the aftermath of painful words. Consider these three tools for healing words: Empathy (pay attention to others' situations but don't equate empathy with understanding another persons experience); Listen more than speaking; and finally, the receiver's perception of what you are saying is more important than what you think you actually said.

My final question for you is what are guiding the words that come most often from your mouth. Are they words of encouragement or words of reaction.

I leave you with one final image and one final question.

Story of the woman with a stroke. The only word she could speak was Love. The speech therapist who worked with her was left with a personal question in her own live: what word will I be tethered to when all else drops away?

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God. The habitual words we use serve as the seeds for what we embody now and in the future.

