



The Most Fascinating People: James

TEXT
James 3:1–12

June 28, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

I have to confess to you: I really wanted to preach a different sermon today. It was months ago when I chose James as our focus for this week. I planned to tell you a story or two from my days as a newspaper editor. I planned to read you part of a beautiful poem. I planned to maybe talk a little bit about the Supreme Court and marriage equality. And I planned to tell you about a married couple I met in Seattle, who taught me volumes about language and choosing our words carefully. I have to confess to you: I really wanted to preach that sermon today.

But yesterday morning, in Columbia, South Carolina, an African American woman named Bree Newsome climbed up a 30-foot flagpole and cut down the Confederate flag.

She was arrested as soon as she came down again. She issued a statement to the press explaining her actions, and in her words, I heard the voice of James.

Jim/George/Rob/Sharolyn read to us from the New Revised Standard Version. Hear it now from an alternate translation:

A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly any-

thing — or destroy it. It only takes a spark to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it. This is scary: we can tame every kind of beast and bird, every reptile and sea creature, but we can't tame our tongues. It has never been done. Our tongues run wild. They can be wanton killers. With our tongues we bless God; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women made in God's image. Curses and blessings, coming out of the same mouth. My friends, this can't go on.¹

I'm going to quickly review what you already know — that the murder of nine African Americans attending Bible study at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston has reignited the debate about the battle flag flying over the state capitol. That flag has been on state property since 1961. In the past week, South Carolina's governor, senators and representatives have all called for its removal. A vote on Tuesday overwhelmingly called for a

bill to bring the flag down. Until that bill is passed, the flag remains.

Issuing her statement to the press, explaining her actions, Bree Newsome said, "We can't continue like this for another day. It's time for a new chapter. We can't wait any longer."

We don't know much about James. Some say James the letter-writer is James the disciple, brother of John. Some say that's unlikely.

What we do know is that whoever he is, James doesn't mince words. He is perhaps best known for this: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Faith without works is dead."

I want to pause here, because too often, we oversimplify James in this moment. Too often, we hear him saying, "Your actions are what will save you." We understand him to be a counterpoint to the apostle Paul, who writes, "We know that a person is justified not by works, but through faith in Jesus Christ." So we characterize them this way: James only cares about works; Paul only cares about faith. But that's too simple, and it's unfair to them both.

Think of it this way. Paul is deeply concerned with how we become right with God. And to Paul, that happens only through the person of Jesus Christ — only through his death and resurrection. We can't do it on our own, no matter how hard we try, no matter how many good things we do. We are saved because of what God has done for us through Christ. That's Paul. But James would not argue that point. James is not making a claim about how we become right with God. He's not making an argument about the means of salvation. He's saying, if you really understand your faith, your behavior will demonstrate that.

Do you see the difference? Paul says, *this is how* we are saved — through Christ. James says, *because* we are saved through Christ — this is how we are to act.

And in his very next breath, right after saying that behavior matters, James says, "Watch your mouth." (That's my mother's translation; it works.)

That is the first and most important instruction when it comes to our behavior, according to James. Our language, our speech — it is, all unto itself, an action. Our words are a manifestation of our inner selves and our true disposition. Or to put it another way: Our speech reveals who we really are. Our speech shapes all our other actions, everything that follows. For better and for worse, our speech is one of the most powerful, influential things we have.

When I was a kid, my favorite food was macaroni and cheese. It was a staple in the dinner rotation at my house. Except (and this is a little embarrassing) we never called it macaroni and cheese. For longer than any of us can remember, my family has always called that meal "cheese noodles." All I can tell you is that my grandmother called it cheese noodles, my parents called it cheese noodles, my brother and I called it cheese noodles, and my brother's children now call it cheese noodles.

I remember having dinner at a friend's house. It must have been when I was in the first grade, not quite yet able to read for myself. My friend's mom asked me if I wanted some macaroni and cheese. "I don't know what that is," I said. My friend looked at me funny. "We have it at your house all the time," she said. She showed me her plate.

"Oh!" I said. "Cheese noodles. I would love some cheese noodles."

"It's macaroni and cheese," she said.

"No," I said. "It's cheese noodles." This went on for some time. Finally her mother showed me the box and sounded out the words for me: *macaroni and cheese*. I straightened up the full height of my 6-year-old self. "I don't care what the box says," I told her. "They're cheese noodles."

Even when I was confronted with hard evidence, I was not swayed, because over and

over and over again, someone I trusted told me that meal was called cheese noodles.

It's a silly little story. It's a silly little story until you start to think about what else might get taught that way.

James tells us that a very small rudder can direct a giant ship. In the same way, he says, our tongue controls our whole body. So when I read that Dylann Roof told his Charleston victims, "I have to do it. You rape our women and you're taking over the country," I have to wonder when and how, exactly, that boy's rudder snapped.

I don't say that flippantly. I say that with complete sincerity. Because here is the thing: I am convinced that gun control is part of the issue. It is simply too easy to get a gun these days. Gun control is part of the issue. But even more than that, how do we get to the point where someone is aiming that gun at a room full of people sitting in a circle, studying the Bible? To aim a gun at a room full of people, you have to have completely lost sight of the fact that they, too, are made in the image of God. You cannot see God in them. You can only see "other."

Elizabeth Eaton, the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, said, "We might say that this was an isolated act by a deeply disturbed man, but that is not the whole truth. It is not an isolated event. And even if the shooter was unstable, the framework upon which he built

his vision of race is not. Racism is a fact in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact are deadly.”²

Racism is a fact in our culture. And racism is learned behavior. Someone — I don’t know who, but someone — taught Dylann Roof that he was superior, and that those around him in the church that day were different enough to be dangerous. Someone talked an awful lot of hate into him. Someone helped steer his ship right into a storm where it quickly became a wreck.

Yesterday there was a gathering in Ann Arbor, Michigan, one of the places that has been home to me. It was a gathering to start conversation about anti-racism activism. A friend of mine attended. At one point, she said, there was an open mic, and a 13-year-old African American girl named Jaz stepped forward. She said she doesn’t know much about her heritage or black history in general, because they don’t teach that much in her school.

And then she said, “But I have learned that I need to keep my hands close and visible someday, if I am ever pulled over. I have learned that I have a lot to say, but that I must always be docile when I speak. I have learned to keep my eyes down. Last week I learned that my best chance of saying alive is pretending to be dead. This is what I have had to learn.”

Racism is learned behavior. And I have never aimed a gun at someone. But I learned to lock my car doors when I

drove through Detroit, because before I could leave the house, my parents would make me promise. Today, I lock my car doors when I drive through certain parts of Kansas City, but I rarely think about my car doors when I drive through Westwood.

Racism is learned behavior and some of it is obvious, but much of it is subtle. Much of it is systemic. *My friends, this can’t go on.* “We can’t continue like this for another day. It’s time for a new chapter. We can’t wait any longer.”

I’m more than a little afraid that I have flubbed up this entire exercise. That is always a risk when we talk about hard things, especially when time permits you to do little more than tiptoe up alongside the issue. Even still, it is a risk worth taking.

I don’t know how to bring an end to racism. I haven’t a clue. I barely know how to talk about it, here in a room with all of you who are my friends. But I do know that most of the time, the first step toward any sort of healing something is to name it. You prevent it from hiding in the shadows. You pull it out into the light. You stare it down, for more than one week.

Way back in the book of Genesis, on the first page of the first book, God speaks, and creation bursts into being. God says, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God named the light Day. God says, “Let there be a dome,” and there was a dome that God named Sky. God creates, and

God names, because that is what God does.

So it is no small thing when God asks Adam to name all the animals. In that moment, Hebrew tradition believes, in that holy moment, God chose to share with us some of God’s creative power. Since way back in the very beginning, God has trusted us. God has believed in us. And God has not given up on us. Even in the face of all of our broken history, God still seems convinced that we can be better than we are.

So maybe I will tell the story about the married couple I met in Seattle. They are members of my friend Sarah’s church. Their names are Tony and Janel. Tony has advanced ALS. He’s a quadriplegic and on a ventilator with a trach. When he wishes to speak, someone has to wheel him to a computer that reads the movements of his one good eye as he spells out, letter by letter, what he wants to say.

Janel was been his voice for several years. She recently was diagnosed with Stage 4 oral cancer. Now the cancer has robbed her of the ability to speak, as well. They have had to get creative. Janel uses a white board. Tony uses his computer. Communication between them is nearly impossible. It is mind-numbingly slow. It is difficult. It is fraught with errors. And, Janel says, it is worth it. Every word shared is a victory. Every misstep is a chance for grace.

She says when it takes ten minutes to exchange a simple

greeting, you learn to say only what is essential. And over time, she says, you learn to forgive a lot of things. Over time, she says, you'd be surprised at how much you can still learn about each other. Over time, she says, you learn that the only words worth saying are the words that point toward love.

Would that we all learn that lesson!

Amen.

¹This is mostly from The Message translation.

²Excerpted from a statement by Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the ELCA, on June 18, 2015, in response to the Charleston shooting. The full text of the statement is available here: http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/long_season_of_disquiet_letter.pdf

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.