



Words Matter

SCRIPTURE:
James 3:5b-12

August 15, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father; and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. —James 3:5b-12 (NRSV)

It only takes a spark, remember, 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, smoke right from the pit of hell. This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you? —James 3:5b-12 (The Message by Eugene Peterson)

I am second of four boys and in our home, growing up, there were two "S" words we could not say. We could not say "stupid" and "shut up." If we said either of those words, we would get into big trouble.

I was home from college having dinner. Mom and Dad were sitting at their usual places at each end of the dinner table and across from me were my little brothers, Brandon and Garfield, both teenagers. As usual, they were arguing about something inane and at one point, Brandon said to Garfield, "Shut up. You're so stupid." I remember looking up and thinking to myself, "Oh, this is going to be good." I was waiting for the hellfire and brimstone to rain down upon Brandon. I looked at my parents and they were... eating. Just eating.

Now, I do not know what happens to some of you mothers and fathers but clearly, my mother and father had lost their ability to parent. I remember saying to them, "Um, did you just hear what your youngest son said to your third son?" They looked at me and said, "No, what?" "Brandon just said to Garfield, 'S__ up. You're so s_____.'" I could not even bring myself to say those words to my parents even though Brandon had just said them. And my parents said, "Oh, Rodger, just eat your dinner." Yet another injustice upon those of us who are the older children and another topic for my therapist later on in life.

But I understand what my parents were trying to teach us. They were trying to teach us that words matter.

James also tells us that words matter. James tells us that the tongue is like a small fire that burns down a whole forest, something that is happening in the American West even as we sit here. James is reminding us that we human beings can tame huge and powerful creatures—even a tiger as Eugene

Peterson says—but we cannot tame our tongues. James does not have a high opinion of the tongue. He calls the tongue a “restless evil full of deadly poison.” James says our tongues—and the words our tongues speak—in one moment can praise God and in the next moment, can curse others around us, the very persons whom God has entrusted to our care. James says this is unacceptable. Words matter.

You know the aphorism: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but...” You know that is not true. Words matter because words can hurt more than sticks and stones. Long after cuts and bruises and broken bones have healed, hurtful words still wound us.

In the 20th century, we thought words, at best, were a tool. We thought words were largely benign. We thought words could, at best, describe reality. But now, in the 21st century, in this age of post-structuralism, we know that language has great power. Words not only describe reality; words actually create reality.

I want to use a Tupperware toy to illustrate the power of words to create reality. This is Tupperware’s shape sorter. It’s been around for more than 50 years. It teaches our young children to recognize shapes. So, imagine that each of these shapes is a word and this plastic ball is you—your soul, your identity, your self-image. As you hear some words more frequently than others, you create a shape in your soul to receive those words. If you are told most often that you are beautiful, a child of the living God, worthy of love, that you are kind, that you are thoughtful, that you are generous and trusting, then you create those spaces in you to accommodate those words and take them in. They become your identity, your reality, your self-image.

But if you are told most often that you are unattractive, worthless, a problem, unlovable, and selfish, then you will create those spaces in you to accommodate those words and that will become your reality. So, when someone says that you are loving and worthy of love, if there is no space in your soul to receive that, it just bounces off you.

All those hurtful words—that you are not worthy of being loved, that you are worthless, that you are not capable of loving, that you love the wrong per-

son, that you cannot be forgiven—all those hurtful words are lies.

James says words matter. Words matter because words can be hurtful and tear down. And words can also be healing and build up.

Some of you remember that in March a young man shot and killed eight people in Atlanta, six of whom were Asian-American women. This came amidst a rising tide of anti-Asian hatred across the United States surrounding COVID-19. Some of you know that I live about a mile and a half away from the church here at Village on Mission and during the shut-down, I started walking because I couldn’t go visit hospital rooms or homes or meet people for coffee or a meal so I didn’t need my car.

In the days following the killings in Atlanta, I was walking to church about 7:30 in the morning and approaching me was an older white woman walking her little dog. I stepped off the sidewalk to walk in the street per COVID protocol. As we passed, we made eye contact and said “good morning” to each other. I kept walking and after a few steps, I heard her say, “Excuse me. I’m sorry, but...” I stopped and turned around and she continued, “I am sorry to bother you and I don’t know you but I have seen you walking before. I just wanted to say that I am so sorry about what happened in Atlanta and I hope you are okay. I’m glad you’re here.” And as I heard her beautiful words, I felt this lump in my throat and standing there, I began to cry. And I said to her, “Thank you so much for your kindness. It means so much. I’m actually doing well. Thank you.” And she smiled at me and after waving, we turned and walked away from one another.

A few days after that, I received a note from Dr. John Hall, a member here and part of our Social Justice ministry, who, also knowing that I walked here, asked if I was okay. I thanked Dr. Hall and said that I was well. Then, that next Monday, rather cryptically, Charlotte Davison, an elder on our session, asked if I was going to be walking home from the church and what time would that be. I told Charlotte about 7 p.m. I had a meeting that night and at 7 p.m., Tom Are turned to me and said, “Um, Rodger. You need to go.” I said, “But the meeting isn’t done yet.” He said, “Yes, but you need to meet

some people at the north entrance.” “Who?” I asked. “I don’t know who all will be there but just go see,” and he smiled. That always makes me nervous when Tom smiles like that.

So, I got my things together and walked out the north entrance to see 37 of you standing there. When I appeared, the group clapped and said, “We’re here to walk you home. We want to be sure you are safe.” I received a note a few days later that I will cherish forever from two of our members. They had heard about walking with me and wrote that

they wanted to join but they’re both in their eighties and one of them uses a walker and they were afraid they would slow me down but they were with me in spirit. They, too, wanted to be sure I was safe.

Words matter. They have the power to hurt and tear down. They have the power to heal and build up. Use your words to heal and build up. This is practical wisdom from James: Listening matters. Actions matter. Words matter.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.