

“Word Power”

James 3:1-12 – September 13, 2009

INTRO: The little letter of James calls us to demonstrate our faith in the smallest acts of daily living. We hear today, about the need to be concerned about the words we use in our speech. This passage was originally aimed at teachers, but as we hear it, I believe we come to the realization that at some point, we all function as teachers and role models for others. Whether we like it or not, somebody learns from us. No other New Testament book features the role and dangers of speech, pointing out both the positive and negative potential of our words.

Sometimes life pushes our buttons, and we vent our frustration through our words. I remember once in Monona, looking outside and seeing a number of my neighbor’s garbage cans and recycle bins, and I was reminded it was pick-up day. So I drug my garbage & recycling down the hill that was my driveway. At the end of the day, my garbage can had been emptied, but there sat the recycling bin—still full. I was very upset. I looked to make sure it was facing the right direction, for the truck to pick it up, and it was. I looked to see if anybody else’s bin was still at the curb, and they weren’t. So, now I had to drag the heavy thing back up the drive way. With every step, I found I vented my anger to the city for a variety of issues: that they closed our street on the day of the church Ice Cream Social; that they had all this construction going, which made my street a thoroughfare because other streets were closed; that the city is now proposing a round-about in what I thought was a ridiculous intersection. Oh, I let the city have it. I came in the house and called my neighbor. “Mary, did they pick up your recycling today?” “No,” she said. And I said, “Did they forget you too? What are we going to do?” Then my neighbor said, “Well, I didn’t put out my recycling bin, although I see a lot on our street did. The recycling day is NEXT Wednesday!” Fortunately I don’t believe anybody heard the angry epithets I had hurled into the night air, but that doesn’t get me off the hook.

When was the last time you threw angry words into the air? A question for any of us might be, if a talking parrot lived in our house, would we be comfortable selling the parrot to the town gossip?

Down through the ages there is consensus from wise sages that silence is better than speech; that hearing, not speaking is the pathway to wisdom; that speech when necessary, should be brief; and that above all speech should be under control and never the expression of rage or envy. *(New Interpreter’s Bible)*

That’s the ideal—and clearly there is not a one of us that is always under control. “The ability to produce goodness and evil, blessing and curse, from one’s mouth makes humans unique.”
(Ted Huffman)

The tongue is personified as though it were an independent agent, outside anyone’s control. *(New Interpreter’s Bible)*

When you think about the size of the tongue, in comparison to the overall size of our bodies, it’s pretty amazing how much trouble this small part of us can get us into. What comes out of our mouths can infect every area of life.

“Small things can do great harm. Size is not the main measure of power. The tongue is like a rudder or bridle—tiny by comparison with the ship or horse, but highly leveraged. Moving the rudder just slightly at the beginning of the voyage can be the difference between docking in England or Spain.” *(Fred Craddock)*

And the tongue is also compared to a match.

“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.” (vs. 6)

Think about the Patrick Cudahy plant that was on fire for three days in July, threatening lives, causing more than 50 million dollars in damage, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of residents for about 13 hours, and putting hundreds of employees out of work. Twenty-seven area fire departments collaborated to fight the raging blaze that devastated about a fourth of the more than 1 million-square-foot plant. *(Journal Sentinel 7/15/09)*

The fire was caused by a military flare thrown by the brother of a former marine, who claimed he didn’t know the flare’s capability.

Sometimes we seem to not know what our words are capable of doing either. We don't know or think about their consequences.

"Our words can set fire to relationships that have been carefully nurtured for years and are savagely destroyed by the wrong words said in the wrong way." (Fred Craddock)

Some people feel they can say things, whether they are true or not. Frustrated parents sometimes vent their anger on their children, with long-lasting negative results. Gossip or judging others can destroy reputations and relationships.

"With our words we name the world and each other, and at least in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality. Once our speech and narratives take hold, they have a tremendous power and tenacity for good or evil. They can exclude or embrace, heal or humiliate, lift up or tear down." (Dan Clendenin)

Think of the power of words you have heard, or that you have spoken, over the course of your life: "You are too small to be a good basketball player," says a coach. "Girls should steer clear of science and engineering," advises a parent or teacher. "You can't be a Christian and believe that!" scolds a neighbor. "You are such a loser," says a cool kid in the cafeteria. "Don't tell your parents," warns an abusive uncle, "no one will believe you." (Homiletics, Sept. 2006)

"When we hear a word, the physical movement that enters our ear and then inner ear activates 24,000 little nerves. Our whole physical system reacts when we hear words of care or condemnation. When we hear words that bring us pain or anxiety, the physical-chemical reactions take 72 hours to subside." (John Jewell)

"It is amazing that you can give a thousand words of praise to a person, but make one harsh statement to that same person and those will be the words that are remembered. As soon as you said the words, you may have wished you could bring them back, but the damage has already been done." (Edward Markquart)

A story of a man who lived in a highland village in Scotland, illustrates this point. This man passed along a story about another man that he didn't care for. At the time, he thought the story to be true. When the story got around the village, it utterly destroyed the man. His family, his job and his integrity were all devastated by the rumor mill. He finally had to leave town—ruined & defeated. In time, the fellow who passed the story along discovered that the rumor was false. He had helped to destroy an innocent man with his tongue. He went to his pastor and told him the whole story, and asked if he could be forgiven of his sin. The pastor told the man that this was not so simple, and told him to take a bag of feathers and place one in the front yard of every house in the village. Although the fellow thought this to be a strange request, he really wanted forgiveness, so he did it. At last he came back to the pastor and said he'd followed the instructions and could he now be forgiven? "Not yet, my son," said the pastor. "You must first retrace your steps and bring back to me every feather you placed in the village!" "But—I could never do that, the wind has carried all the feathers away!" "Yes," the pastor said, "and in like manner your careless words have destroyed an innocent man."

"The most powerful medium for reinforcing a shared view of the world is simple everyday conversation." (Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann)

Whether we're talking to our neighbor across the fence or making what we think is a benign comment in front of our children, we are shaping perceptions of the world and the people in the world. The words we use are important. Words that trip off the tongue, and don't sound troublesome at the time, may be words that if a person could have a do-over, they might choose different ones.

The power of words was repeatedly in the news this week as some in our country became absolutely obsessed and fearful of the words President Obama might share with our country's school-children, before they ever really knew that the subject of his speech would be that of encouraging these children to work hard in school and to grow up to play a valuable part in our society.

Then there were representative Joe Wilson's harsh words to the President. Joe later admitted his words were spontaneous, which often ends up being the case when we shout something at somebody else without thinking.

And Serena Williams' words to a line judge got her dismissed from the US Open.

Here and there in our society, civility seems to be in short supply.

Yes, all of us make mistakes, as our reading points out. But the writer of James isn't inferring that it's OK to keep making them. We are challenged to improve, to think before we speak.

William Shakespeare was good with words and is credited to having added over 2000 words to the English language. If he couldn't find the right word, he created it. In Hamlet alone, there were 600 new words. The average person has a 4000-5000 word vocabulary. It is believed that Shakespeare had a 29,000 word vocabulary. Like Shakespeare, we may need to more carefully choose our words. We may especially need to find the right word, when it comes to the ways we speak with each other.

Instead of letting loose with our emotions, especially if we are angry or defensive, we might want to take a little more time of quiet, and find the best word to say. Our words have amazing power—they can build people up, they can break down relationships, they can cause lasting hurt, they can help someone begin to heal. They fall out of our mouths, maneuvered by that small but mighty tongue, which an old proverb says “is in a wet place and can easily slip.”

We are the spokespeople for God in our world. What we say and how we live, may be the only Bible some people will ever read. And ultimately, our words are controlled by each one of us—who hopefully more and more, will do our best to recognize and honor the Christ who dwells in each of us as we live in community together.

--Sue Burwell