

“Just Words”

First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 19:7-14

New Testament Lesson: James 3:1-12

We live in a world where Facebook posts can end friendships and drive people away. Tweets on Twitter can end careers, ignite political battles, and set nations on edge. A loving text message can destroy a marriage – when it’s sent to a someone outside the marriage. Then the text ends up as evidence in court.

What would James think! I mean he was worried about how we speak to each other, which can be cleaned up pretty quickly face-to-face. But when we use Social Media to vent our frustrations, attack people we disagree with, or God forbid when people use it to carry on an affair, the damage is done and the words are out there for all to see and remember – forever. Even if you delete a post or a tweet, someone, somewhere may have it saved.

We live in a time when major disagreements are being aired in public, and so did the Apostle James. The Letter of James was written to Jewish Christians in a time of major political, social, and economic tensions. The Roman economy was struggling to maintain its global supremacy, the Jewish community was splintering into political opposition parties, and the radicals of society were gaining greater voice and more influence.

In fact, just a few years after James wrote his letter of warning, a radical group called the Zealots led a revolution against Rome that led to the fall of Jerusalem in 66 A.D. and the destruction of the temple.

With the world he knew and loved coming apart at the seams, James sits down and writes a letter. He doesn’t write about how to defeat your political opponent. He doesn’t write about how to take over the government. He doesn’t write about how to leave the country and move somewhere else. James writes about controlling our tongues, the words we say to one another.

I love the images that James uses to describe our need to control our tongues, what we say. A bit in the mouth of a horse guiding the whole body, a small rudder on a ship turning the huge vessel, an entire forest destroyed by one small fire. “And the tongue is a fire,” says James. “The tongue ... sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.” Pretty powerful words. James is saying that our tongues, our speech can be a tool of the devil, a force of evil. And we get that, don’t we? We see it every day.

How often do we say things out of anger or spite, and then regret it moments later. And still, it eats at us. Until we talk to the person and apologize, our spiteful words take over our whole body. We can't sleep well, our appetite is affected, we can't think straight, and our world is turned upside down. James is trying to save us from that.

It's like the guy on his first day of work at the supermarket. A lady comes up to him wanting to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tries to talk her out of it but she insists. Finally he says, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager." As he goes to the rear of the store, he doesn't notice that the woman is walking right behind him. He says to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?" Seeing the horrified look on the manager's face, he turns around, sees the woman, and adds, "Oh, and this nice lady wants to buy the other half. Would that be all right?" Relieved, the manager says, "That would be fine." Later in the day, he congratulates the boy on his quick thinking and asks, "Where are you from, son?" The boy says, "I'm from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women." The manager replies, "My wife is from Toronto" – to which the boy says, "Oh, what team did she play for?"

We can't always be as quick on our feet as the boy in the supermarket. And James wants to save us from having to be. How do we keep from saying the wrong thing in the heat of the moment? How do we better reflect the Spirit of Christ in a world of darkness?

A recent book by Baylor University professor Alan Jacobs offers great advice.¹ Jacobs suggests that we all need to relearn how to think before we speak. His suggestions – from his book, "How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds" – can be summarized in three simple rules to live by.

First, be thoughtful. When you're tempted to respond quickly, give it five minutes. Take a walk, make dinner, do some deep breathing – whatever it takes to get your body involved. When our bodies are moving, says Jacobs, our brains have time to process. Or, as James says earlier in the letter, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." That's James 1 verse 19. Be thoughtful.

Second, be teachable. Jacobs suggests that one reason people respond to things on Facebook or Twitter is to see the reaction of their friends. The problem is, our "friends" on Facebook and Twitter tend to be people who think just like we do.

¹ **Jacobs, Alan. *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*. New York: Crown Publishing, 2017.**

Or as another writer says, social media offers great promise of cooperation and communication across all humanity, but instead of bring us together it's driving us apart. "... We seem to be reverting to tribalism and conflict," says Gaia Vince in her article titled "Why Nice People Become Mean Online."²

Rather than building networks of like-minded people, Jacobs suggests we look outside our social group for new ideas and perspectives. We can all learn from others, even from those with whom we disagree – if we focus on being teachable, open to new ideas and perspectives.

The third and final rule to live by is be honest. Simply state what you truly think and believe, based on God's wisdom and love. Our first instinct may be to say whatever makes us look good while taking down the other guy, but our Christian calling is to first search the heart of God and the Spirit of truth, before we speak, before we convince ourselves we're right. James points us to the heart of God and the source of divine truth when he says, "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."

What James is saying is that we can know the origin and character of our words and actions by looking at how they affect others. That will tell us if what we've said or done is an expression of God's will or does it come from our self-centered nature. If what we say and do comes from God it will be a blessing to those in our lives. If not, we and they suffer, and our world is all the poorer. Don't be a spring of water that pumps out nastiness. Don't be a tree or plant that throws off rotten fruit. Instead, let us all be more thoughtful, teachable and honest with ourselves and others. Easier said than done sometimes. We need to practice being more thoughtful with what we say, and we need a safe and supportive place to do it.

When I was in seminary, I found it to be a wonderful source of divine wisdom and love. It's like a training camp where one learns to check your thoughts and words against what would be supportive and encouraging, even when you disagreed with someone else.

Well, our homes and certainly our churches need to be the same. We need to create and embrace places in our lives where we practice being supportive and encouraging, rather than combative and superior. And then we need to take those practices into other parts of our lives, so the world will be a better reflection of God's wisdom and love.

² Gaia Vince, "Why nice people become mean online," edition.cnn.com. April 3, 2018. Retrieved April 17, 2018.

Decide how you will act in this House of God -- thoughtful, teachable, and honest – and then take that into your home, your circle of friends, your community.

By divine grace, we have been given the source of wisdom and love through the Living Word of God. Let us each draw from that source, as a thoughtful, teachable and honest person, a child of God, ever becoming a truer reflection of Jesus Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh God, how we love you! We do not say it enough. We love you.

We want our actions to demonstrate our love; we want our words to communicate our deep connection to you.

We love you because you first loved us. Thank you for showing us what true love is. We join in that love at this time, as we pray for ourselves and for others.

We pray all those we continue to hold in prayer from recent weeks.

And for us, Lord, we pray that our desires, our very being, be directed toward you, and that our lives never stop showing you how much we love you.

Receive our worship today as an outpouring of our love. We give all of this to you, and in the name and Spirit of your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying ...

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**