

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS!

James 1:17-27

Once there was a pastor who was such a golf addict that one Sunday he called in sick and went golfing instead. Two angels were above him on the golf course, discussing the situation. One angel said, "You just wait. I'm going to punish him good for this." The other angel just waited to see what would happen. The pastor stepped up to the first tee where he whacked the ball 300 yards straight down the middle of the fairway. Since he had never driven the ball more than 200 yards, he couldn't believe it. And his luck continued. Long drives on every hole, perfect putting. By the ninth hole he was six under par and was playing near-perfect golf. The fellow was walking on air. He wound up with an amazing 61, about 30 strokes under his usual game. The one angel looked at the other and said, "Wait a minute. I thought you were going to punish him." The other angel smiled and said, "That is punishment. Who is he going to tell?"

This morning we are beginning a 5-week series on the Book of James. First a little background on the book. The epistle of James is known as one of the "general" epistles. While it begins with salutations and greetings like any other letter, the fact that there are not any instructions in the body of the document directed at any one in particular indicates that it was not written for any specific congregation. Some theologians such as the Church Father Martin Luther, are reluctant to place too much emphasis on this early letter of the church because they feel it detracts from the understanding that salvation is through Christ alone and not the result of works.

Renowned Pastor and educator Chuck Swindoll says, *The book of James looks a bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs dressed up in New Testament clothes. Its consistent focus on practical action in the life of faith is reminiscent of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, encouraging God's people to act like God's people. The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. He makes no excuses for those who do not measure up. In the mind of this early church leader, Christians evidence their faith by walking in certain ways and not others. For James, a faith that does not produce real life change is a faith that is worthless.*

James was a keen observer of human nature, and he paid close attention to the details of everyday living. He noticed the generous acts, the small gifts, the gestures and the words we use. Why was he so focused on words and the way we use them? Good question. Words are powerful, words can build up, and they can also cut down. Although we United Methodists do not gamble, I would be willing to bet an entire month's salary that every single adult here has words or phrases that can play over and over in your heads. "You will never amount to anything." "You are so pretty, you don't need to be smart." "Don't blow it." "We are counting on you winning this game for the team!" In the play and movie, *My Fair Lady*, Audrey Hepburn reaches her limit with words in her attempt to learn to speak like a proper English Lady. One of her musical numbers begins with the following: *Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?*

My Mother, God rest her soul, had an uncanny ability of opening her mouth only to switch feet. There are 2 memorable occasions which have become part of our family history. The first was at the wedding of my older sister. Mom was still thrilled with her new son-in-law and as she raised her champagne glass

to toast him, my two brothers were flanking her wheelchair. Mom opened her toast with these words, “To the Son I never had!” My brothers’ reaction was immediate; looking across Mom’s head Chris asked George, “Well then what are we? Chopped Liver?”.

The second occurred two nights before our wedding. The oldest, youngest and I were dining with Mom when a waitress complimented Mom on her beautiful children. Mom thanked her, and then, not missing a beat said, “And my two most beautiful children are not even here!” Poor mom. Even in jest, words matter.

One of my study helps listed how words are used; there were a least 30+ words! Just a few of the examples – we use words to convince and convict, to describe, name, blame or label things; to win arguments; sell an idea, lecture; persuade, announce, denounce...we really cannot do without words. According to James, we cannot bring about God’s righteousness through revengeful or evil speech, which only spreads destruction. James says to stop doing this. Destructive anger can poison our lives and that of the community as well. Destructive acts can never be the means for illuminating God’s presence or making room for divine goodness in our lives. They cannot promote God’s righteousness. (Feasting on the Word year B, volume 4).

Then, James shares his words on anger in verse 19 and 20, *Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn’t produce God’s righteousness.* James does not deny the importance or strength of anger. He does not tell us to “swallow” or “stuff” it. Rather he encourages us to transform anger into a virtue. Rather than burst out in anger, which is rarely productive no matter how good it might make one feel, what James is suggesting is that we allow God space in which to work as God wants to work. Sometimes God is able to accomplish the most when we get out of God’s way. Amen? Here is something else to consider, what if; you and I are the ones in whom God needs to work? What if, God wants us to use the energy fueling our anger to bring about something truly good and productive?

In the aftermath of the death of Senator John McCain, one of the many images I watched on the news showed him responding to a constituent during the 2008 Presidential election. The woman says the following to McCain: *I can’t trust Obama. I have read about him, and he’s not, um, he’s an Arab,* a woman said to McCain at a town hall meeting in Lakeville, Minnesota. The woman attempted to continue talking, but Senator McCain reclaimed the microphone from her defending his opponent. *No, ma’am,* he said. *He’s a decent family man and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what the campaign’s all about. He’s not an Arab.* Wow! Talk about greatness. The woman literally handed Senator McCain a golden opportunity to bash his opponent, and rather than take the bait, McCain stands for the truth. Both Former Presidents George Bush and Barack Obama are speaking at McCain’s funeral – I think that has something to say about the character of the man; and I think this is a powerful example of what James is teaching in these verses: *Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.*

Next, we read the first inkling of this letter of James towards good works in verse 22: *You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.* What we do matters, really matters, and what comes out of our mouths can make a difference, for good or ill, but...our actions speak louder than our words. Words may touch our emotional life and help us anticipate what is going to happen. But our actions establish the structures of meaning that build our worlds. Actions add value to our words and give them life. (Feasting, year B) Over the years I have really come to appreciate that, Vern shows me he loves me in the dozens of ways he takes care of me. His actions speak volumes more than those three little words, "I love you," I am always teasing him to say. We, you and I are to be walking, living examples of the love of God.

A new recruit went into training at Paris Island, hoping to become a marine. He was one of those young men who seemed to be a bit out of step with the norm, and he easily became the subject of ridicule. In the particular barracks to which he was assigned, there was an extremely high level of meanness. The other young men did everything they could to make a joke of the new recruit and to humiliate him. One day, someone came up with the bright idea that they could scare the daylights out of this young marine by dropping a disarmed hand grenade onto the floor and pretending it was about to go off. Everyone who knew about this thought it was perfect. The hand grenade was thrown in the middle of the floor and the warning was yelled, "It's a live grenade, it's a live grenade! It's about to explode!". They fully expected the young man to get hysterical and run from the barracks perhaps even jump out a window. Instead, the young marine fell on the grenade, hugged it to his stomach, and yelled to the other men in the barracks, "Run for your lives! Run for your lives! You'll be killed if you don't!" His fellow marines froze in stillness and shame. They realized that the one they had scorned was the one ready to lay down his life for them. Actions speak louder than words.

James is encouraging us to take responsibility for our own anger. In that way we may exercise self-control and become decision makers, architects of relationships and builders of the beloved community of faith. When we do this, we are transformed from being part of the problem to becoming part of the solution.

A great place to glean some profound insights into life is from children's stories. On a Winnie the Pooh record, for instance, there is a scene that is a delightful illustration of our desire to hear words that are friendly and warm, rather than harsh or hard. One day, Pooh Bear is about to for a walk in the Hundred Acre wood. It's about 11:30 in the morning. It is a fine time to go calling – just before lunch. So, Pooh sets out across the stream, stepping on the stones, and when he gets right in the middle of the stream he sits down on a warm stone and thinks about just where would be the best place of all to make a call. He says to himself, "I think I'll go see Tigger." No, he dismisses that. Then he says, "Owl!" Then, "No Owl uses big words, hard-to-understand words." At last he brightens up! "I know! I think I'll go see Rabbit. I like Rabbit. Rabbit uses encouraging words like, 'How's about lunch?' and 'Help yourself, Pooh!'" Yes, I think I'll go see Rabbit.

Words, Words, Words! Stay tuned for next week's message from James 2:1-17. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!