

“Sticks and Stones”
Sermon 2 of 3 in the Series on James
Proverbs 1:20-23, James 3:1-18
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When I was a little girl, my siblings or neighbourhood playmates would occasionally say very hurtful things to me, and periodically would call me unkind names. And when I’d cry to my mother, she’d say, “Just tell them, ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words and names can never hurt me.’”

We all know that’s a load of rubbish, of course. It’s sing-song verse full of wishful thinking that pretends to ignore how words do, in fact, have enormous power over everything in our world. If there’s any doubt about that, all we need to do is reflect on the past week’s news. The careless words of powerful men have upset the formidable relationship and goodwill between two of the world’s most powerful nations. Granted, emotions are highly-strung and the words ‘*catastrophic disaster*’ scarcely come close to describing the mess that British Petroleum and the American government are trying to cope with the moment. But there’s no denying that the angry words of President Obama and the equally angry open-letter response from BP’s CEO, John Napier, set off a firestorm on both sides of the Atlantic.

On a much more personal scale, we all know the truth of the power of words from our own experience. Someone can say a thousand positive things to you, but it’s the one negative thing they say that you’re going to dwell on. And somehow, we manage to do the most hurtful work with our words to the ones who matter most to us. The damage done by words spoken unwisely can take months, even years to reverse. And that should be a sobering reality in a time where words are so cheap, so prolific. Given the explosion of media we have for communicating and the ease with which mis-communication happens, each of us needs to be that much more careful about speaking wisely.

Last week, Helen-Ann Hartley kicked off our three-week sermon series on the letter of James by giving us some background information about the text of this letter, and its original context. With respect to the letter’s author, she pointed out that he is thought by some biblical scholars to have been James, the brother of Jesus, who was also the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. Others think that whoever wrote it was simply alerting the audience that he was part of the legacy and faith tradition associated with Jesus’ brother.

More significantly, Helen-Ann acknowledged that this “letter” is less of a letter than it is a piece of wisdom writing well in keeping with the ancient Jewish tradition of wisdom literature. It’s addressed very broadly, not to a discrete church community somewhere. And because this is the case, I think it will be helpful for us to look at some of the working ideas of the wisdom tradition before we turn to James Chapter Three.

According to Jewish tradition, wisdom is acquired by adhering to the Jewish Law. The classic book of Hebrew wisdom literature we read from this morning—the Book of Proverbs—is attributed to Solomon, who represented the very personification of wisdom. The book of Proverbs begins this way, stating as its purpose: “For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice and equity. . .” (1:2-3)

We heard Liz read a few verses from the middle of Chapter 1, where “wisdom cries out in the streets”, inviting everyone who would come and learn from her (it’s both interesting and pleasant to note that wisdom and God’s Holy Spirit are consistently referred to in the feminine form throughout the Hebrew scriptures), to seek her out and listen to her because she offered a life of peace and joy.

Later, wisdom goes on to say that the life she has to offer is one of great wealth, of *true* wealth. But contrary to what the world might think, this wealthy life has nothing to do with acquiring material possessions, and everything to do with the acquisition of divine wisdom: “Happy are those who find wisdom,” Proverbs says, “and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.” (3:13-15)

Chapters 2 and 3 of Proverbs explain how to acquire that true wealth: “My child,” chapter two begins, “if you accept my words and *treasure up my commandments within you*. . . then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.” (2:1, 5) And chapter three leads off saying, “My child, do not forget my teaching, but *let your heart keep my commandments*; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.” (3:1-2)

So, acquiring wisdom is all about adhering to God’s Law—and the divine law has at least as much to do with what we *do* as what we *believe*: the law is all about right practise. So, our faith is borne out in our actions. As you read through the letter of James, it becomes clear that he is a strong adherent to this approach to living the godly life. Robert Wall, a biblical scholar at Seattle Pacific University, writes that the letter of James “reverberat[es] with themes of biblical wisdom from ancient Israel through the traditions of Jesus and Paul, [and] calls us to be a wise community that walks and talks the ‘wisdom from above.’”¹

In Matthew’s gospel, when a Pharisee asks Jesus what is the most important Law, Jesus boils it all down in his answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:37)

James echoes this in 2:8, saying, “You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” He clearly assumes that loving God with heart, soul and mind is proven by demonstrating real acts of loving your neighbour as yourself.

He goes on to explain how merely recognising the truth of something and assenting to it in faith is not enough. Integrity of faith demands that we walk our talk, because faith without works is worthless; if there’s nothing to demonstrate the faith, then it’s as good as dead. The way you prove that you love the Lord your God with heart, mind and soul is by loving your neighbour as yourself.

Then he gives two concrete examples of individuals who lived by faith, trusting God completely, and loving their neighbour as themselves. He mentions Abraham (you may recall Kelly Clark’s sermon of last month, where he demonstrated quite vividly that, despite the reputation Abraham has for being a giant of faith, he was nonetheless a very mixed bag as far as character is concerned); and Rahab, who despite being a prostitute was nonetheless credited as being a woman of profound faith. No doubt, James intended for

¹ Robert W. Wall, “The Wisdom of James”, ©2009 Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.

this to reassure people that you need not have a spotless past to be person of great integrity; you just have to *act* courageously on the faith you have within you.

From there James moves on to talk about one of the most vexing and universal of human foibles. It's all bound up in that tiny, little, two-inch by one-inch muscle that has the power to change the world, for better or worse.

"How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" he says. "And the tongue is a fire . . . itself set on fire by Gehenna/hell. Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can and has been tamed by human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (3:5, 6) Just a brief word of explanation here. "*Gehenna* is the Hellenized (Greek) form of Hinnom, a valley used as a garbage dump near Jerusalem, which became an important metaphor for evil and a possible location for the great eschatological battle when God's good triumphs over the devil's evil."² No doubt, the original audience would have had an image of the place in their minds' eye.

Obviously, James was using "the tongue" as a metaphor for words in general. And clearly, he was exaggerating when he said "*no one* can tame the tongue", because his whole point is about the importance of Christians disciplining themselves to watch carefully how we speak, what we say, and how we bandy words about. He begins by pointing out the enormous power for good that tiny instruments can have on the larger reality they participate in. For example, consider the bit in a horse's bridle, or the rudder on a large ship. Both are relatively miniscule items when compared to the size of the whole—but they are crucial in controlling the direction and success of any journey.

James was writing to a fledgling community of faith that was in the process of identifying leaders and teachers to organise and guide them. Following the ways of the world, indulging in careless or proud or cavalier speech, would inevitably lead the community down the road that led to Gehenna—a place of great evil. Instead, James is urging appropriate restraint from the leaders (and indeed, the laity as well!) so that their destiny might instead be the fulfilment of God's reign, and their future in the heavenly kingdom might be secure. But what exactly is the bit, or the rudder, that helps to establish the right direction for the community?

It's wisdom. James draws the connection by transitioning abruptly away from his talk about the perils of the out-of-control tongue, asking: "Who is wise and understanding among you?" (3:13)

Most likely, the original audience would have recognised his allusion to Moses' instruction for Israel to search for "wise and understanding leaders" who could mediate any conflict that threatened the unity of the tribal confederacy (cf. Deut. 1:12-13).³ James recognised the significance that their search for congregational leaders and teachers held for the future direction of the Church. So he painted a picture of the different kinds of outcomes they might wind up with, depending on the kind of wisdom those leaders exercised. Leaders and teachers who opted for the conventional wisdom of the world—that is, those who exhibited selfish ambition or envy—might anticipate a church that looked very successful by the world's standards. It might be the "cool church", with well-connected and charismatic leaders who said and did all of the right things in order to be a

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

successful enterprise in the world. But the net result of leaders with selfish ambition that overrode a holy grounding and purpose would be “disorder and wickedness of every kind.” (3:16)

By contrast, if the church wisely discerned and opted for leaders and teachers whose wisdom came not from the world but from above, they could anticipate a “harvest of righteousness sown in peace.” (3:18) Wisdom from above, he writes, has the identifiable virtues of being “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (3:17) These character traits may not commend themselves in a survival-orientated, competitive world, but they are the ones that participate in the divine order.

Now, although that early church community was looking for leaders and teachers for their institutional life together, James was not suggesting that it was only the figureheads—the elders and pastors and teachers—who needed to possess these attributes, or who needed to pursue this wisdom from above. Then, as now, the Church is comprised of individuals who inevitably participate in the wider society, and each of us is called to a ministry of servant leadership. The faith-life of a Christian is not a Sunday-only activity; it’s not something we practise only with each other in the privacy of our church gatherings. It’s a life of integrity that we’re called to live out in all of our relationships and communities. If that faith is not being lived out in the marketplace, in the schools, in the political arena, and in our homes, as much as in the sanctuary, then it is not really faith.

One of the enduring challenges facing the Church, and confronting each of us in daily life is how to get a grip on the tongue; how to bridle the power of our words, and whether we direct their blazing-fire potential for destruction or healing in the world. We can set the course for a young person’s life or an entire community by the ill-considered words we choose. Or, we can heal and nourish the human spirit with them. We are called to speak—sometimes in fiery and prophetic ways. (Indeed, sometimes our greater offense might be *not* speaking when we should.) But always, we are called to speak in wise and thoughtful ways.

Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words and names can do even greater damage. The best “bit” with which to bridle our unbroken speech habits is divine wisdom—and this is acquired by faithfully learning and living by God’s law of love. Amen.

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