***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

James 3:7b-10 Rev. Tyler Amundson November 1, 2020

Ephesians 4:29

***Tearing Down Or Building Up***

James 3:7b-10:

People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish.  No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.  With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness.  Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!

I have heard it said so many times in my life, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It is so popularized I have used it as parenting advice, I hear people share it as wisdom, and I have seen it be considered fact.

But is that what the Bible really teaches us about words?

Words are an action. They are not less than that, but they can be more than that. Our entire tradition is based on the idea of God made flesh, the Word incarnate. We must believe words have the power to shape the world, if our entire understanding of the divine is tied to words.

So for the next 4 weeks we are going to examine how our use of words matter, how God calls to us to use our words, and where we can bring grace through the prayerful transmission of words.

The first Sunday we will study how words build up or tear down, the second we will study how words transform the family, the third we will prepare you with words to speak about politics and religion in a world that says that is worth avoiding, and the last Sunday we will hone in on the concept of God’s incarnation through the Word.

When one of my children was a baby, we finished up a worship service at church. It was a fun service and we were hanging around chatting with folks. At one point my child got a little fussy, so I was picked her up. I knew something that would her calm her down, to give us that last minute of conversation. So, I picked her up over my head with her looking back down at me. I lifted my face to make a goofy face at her and from her mouth came some lovely spit up…. and it dropped directly in my mouth. Now, to save my daughters embarrassment you don’t get to know which one.

The funniest part is my wife saw it, and without missing a beat she started laughing hysterically. Not me, I was trying to find anywhere to spit that awful taste out of my mouth and get some water. Eventually Crystal did help me, but it took a few minutes.

Back to our focus of this series, the Letter from James in the New Testament says that the tongue is like a rudder on a ship, a bit in the mouth of a horse, and it has the power to steer our words and change our history, our own and the world. James continues that the tongue is also small like spark, but that spark can cause a destructive forest fire. A reminder that our speech has incredible power to steer and do good, but can in an instant tear down and destroy.

Words have the power to build up relationships, marriages, families, and deep friendships. However, poorly chosen words can destroy our relationship and tear them down all too quickly.

One Rabbi in the Talmud said, “The tongue is so dangerous an instrument it needs to be covered by two layers, the teeth and the lips.”

This brings me to one of our scriptures for today. In fact it is on a small business card we would like you to have. You can download it from our website at the link on the screen and we will put the scripture on the screen too. We will say these each week and let’s practice it today:

(Put on the screen the following scripture and the website.)

Ephesians 4:29:

Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.

I encourage you to say this scripture and the psalm we will say later, each day as we do this series. Keep the card by your bed or somewhere you will have it each day.

You are probably wondering why I told you that story about my daughter spitting up into my mouth earlier. Here is why. The word foul in Greek, used in this scripture today, is Sapros. The taste of my daughters spit up was the equivalent of something that was spoiled, liquified and putrid. My daughter was not, her spit up was. I have never tasted anything quite so foul. That is what Sapros is in this scripture.

It is decaying grossness, it is pre-processed left over bleeecckkkk.

The writer of this letter would have known this and was making it clear that foul words are like regurgitation, they really don’t have a purpose for much of anything.

I am curious, “Have you ever been the on the opposite end of words regurgitated on you?” I know in this political, coronavirus, strange time we live in that people are struggling and I can’t tell you the number of times I have been on the regurgitated end of someone who just needs to get something out of their system. The words wreak with all their own challenges and leftover emotions with no place to go.

That is one of the regurgitations this author was speaking to, the other was something we see all too often in our culture. Bullying or violent harm with our words.

I remember being the butt end of a few jokes growing up. And I can remember times when several people ganged up on me with their words. You see I was not the right shape growing up, I was always too something in some place making me clumsy or not the most sleek kid. I remember the comments and the pain when I couldn't quite do the same things or look the coolest as other kids.

To our youth and children, know that many of us have experienced the awful words of another in early life.

The thing I always had to remember was often others were getting bullied when I as too. So, one of the things I would offer our young people is to remember Jesus is with us in those times we feel picked on and many times he is asking us to see if we can help others out of those tough times too. Know that no one deserves to be demeaned with words and if you need a kind word let me or another trusted adult know. We want you to know that you can get through it and we believe God and Jesus will walk you out of those harsh places.

Kids and youth, you also have a responsibility too, if you see a bully do what you can. Jesus asks of us to love our neighbor and we can do this by helping people find ways to stand up to bullies, these people who would use their words to tear others down.

Adults, just so you don't think we are off the hook. We have a responsibility to stand up to bullying in our world too. Public leaders who would bully others should not be supported, know that I and others would stand with you if you felt bullied, to walk through those challenges. Bullying, words that are putrefied are not ok at any age.

Now before I go too much farther I want redeem a notion I hear a lot today. I hear, “Part of the problem is we have so many words out there, some of them are bound to be garbage.” The reason folks say this is that we are constantly surrounded by words in texts, social media, news updates, and more. The argument seems to be that people are bound to produce junk because we are asked to produce so much to catch peoples attention.

My response after studying life and scripture is one of my favorite words – Malarky. It means false. Let me give you an example why I think this.

There is study out there that says kids, young kids, ask a ton of questions. 400 a day for 4 year old girls. 700 a day for 4 year old boys. Parents ever wonder why you are sometimes caught saying, “That’s enough questions for right now.” Those are enough words to wear anyone out, but these minds that God designed like sponges are seeking information to help make sense of their world.

Now anyone that has been around a 4 year old is thinking, “Tyler, some of those questions are junk questions. So, it doesn't prove your point that more words aren’t junk words.”

Hold on…what if I told you the average number of questions an adult asks per day. The studies I looked at put us in the single digits, one study narrowed it down and said adults ask about 6 questions on average per day.[[1]](#footnote-1)

How do we go from 400 and 700 to 6 questions?

This is what I think, I think we move from curiosity to thinking we have to be sure about everything. And I think our words do likewise. Yet, Christ calls us to have faith like a child.

That means the use of our words, might be more Christlike, faith filled if the bulk of them were questions. Curiosity might take care of a lot of our putrefied and decaying words that are spewed into our culture.

Perhaps I would suggest our faith would be stronger if we stopped trying to be so sure the Bible was literal, and instead asked, “What is God hoping the Bible to be for us in this time?”

Jesus says in the book of Matthew, “The mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

Recently I heard our Bishop say that one of our biggest deficits in the church is we have failed to encourage people to love themselves and so our disciples do not spill over love, but instead…well I have shared enough regurgitation stories today.

Jesus goes on in Matthew to remind us that when we are filled with good things we are able to build up the world with our words. That when at the end of our lives we look back with Jesus at the days we have lived. The days when we allow the good to follow from our lips, will be the days he can say, “Well done good and faithful servant.” And those days will not always be the big successful days our world considers, sometimes it will be the days we said the little kind word that transformed someone’s life.

All we can do is pray we use our words to bring life, and not decay.

Audrey Hunt tells a story of when she was a young teacher, a mom of 3 kids, with piles of dirty dishes and laundry at home. The story sounds all too familiar to the challenges of our lives. Audrey taught music theory at a community college. She says that the first day of class you would always see the typical reality. Confident and aggressive students would take the front desks, those present and engaged the middle and the shy and less confident would take the back row.

Edward was one of her students that term and he looked like he would prefer to have his desk out in the hall. Edward often ate lunch by himself and Audrey would from time to time try to eat with him, she just kept getting a nudge to pay attention.

Edward did not do well in the class, and watching him during the final exam was painful. Audrey let the students know when final grades would be available. About the time she was going to post them, Edward came to her class and he looked about as disheveled and unclean as Audrey had ever seen him. He began by saying,

*“I know that I’m getting a low grade on my final. I realize that I haven’t been participating in class and that I am an embarrassment to others. I’m a lazy, selfish, stupid and an ugly no-good-for-anything person. I have no place on this earth and what’s more, no one can ever love a person like me. I am a hopeless case with absolutely no future”.*

*I could not believe my ears, Audrey shares. I wanted to interrupt him, to convince him that he was none of these things. Instead — I let him talk. I listened with my heart and not my head. I fought back my own tears to manifest my strength and professionalism.*

*When he had finished, I faced him, looked directly into his very sad eyes and said, “Edward, your final grade is an A”. His reaction was one of total and complete surprise. “You are giving me an A? Me? Why would you give me an A when I did such a poor job in class, on my assignments, and on my final exam. Why would you do that?”*

*My answer to Edward was this. “You may appear to be a D student, but you are an A person. I believe in you now and I will always believe in you. I am here for you now and I will always be here for you. Never, ever forget that. Now, go and create the life you dream of. Believe in yourself. I will be watching. And by the way Edward — I love you”*

Edward and Audrey parted ways that day and she did her best to get back to her work, but it took a lot out of her to share those words. That night she had trouble sleeping. She says,

*At 3:00 a.m. the phone rang. In a fog, I tried to sound alert as I answered it. The voice on the phone asked me if I were Edwards Music Theory and Piano Teacher at Moorpark College. I told him yes and waited. “I am a priest from Edwards’ Church and I have something to tell you.” I want to thank you on be-half of Edward’s family and myself for saving his life today.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

You see Edward had a note on his desk and a noose in his closet before he came to talk to Audrey that day.

He went on to have a family and be a dentist who served his community.

Audrey’s words that day were full of life.

Give your tongue to Christ, to be used each day for the life of the world friend's. It is worth it all. We will all falter from time to time, we will spit up on others from time to time, but do all in your power to speak good into this world.

Take out your card once more lets read Ephesians together.

Ephesians 4:29:

Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.

1. <https://tinybop.com/blog/why-its-a-good-thing-kids-ask-so-many-questions> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://medium.com/@audreyhunt/saving-a-life-the-power-of-words-de4a5defbc72> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)