

gospel breaks down the courtroom of our own hearts – where we are forever putting ourselves and others on trial. The gospel speaks a word of finality over our endless striving.

What's the court's decision? The word is "You are my beloved child with whom I am well pleased." And that is a word that heals our sin sick souls. That is God's word for you – because of Jesus Christ. The knowledge that you are beloved even though you are frail, even though you are sinful, even though you are struggling is the antidote to your heart's toxicity.

Remember, why do we boast and why do we curse? Because we are trying to convince ourselves that I'm okay. Because I'm trying to lift myself up by tearing others down. But the gospel is the antidote to this dysfunctional methodology – it says you're okay. You're enough. It says stop striving and rest in Jesus' sacrificial love.

Can you feel those words in your heart today? If you can – if you can hear God's love and take it deep inside of you, what happens? It changes you. How can I speak a harsh word to you if I know that I too am a sinner saved by grace? How can I praise God and curse people at the same time? I can't.

James wants you to know that if you master your words you master your life. How do you master your words? You can't. Because the problem isn't your words. The problem is your heart.

At the end of World War II, there were more than fifty men who came out of prison camps in Indochina suffering from amnesia. Their wartime experience had been so traumatic that they couldn't remember who they were, and there were no records to help identify them.

Someone came up with an idea to run their pictures in a Parisian newspaper

and announce that these men would make an appearance on stage at the city's Opera House. If anyone knew anything about them, they were to come and identify them.

According to the story, on the appointed evening the first soldier marched onto stage and looked out over the audience. As the spotlight focussed on him, he asked "Does anybody out there know who I am?"

Imagine. Imagine how terrifying it would be to not know who you are or whose you are. Imagine relying on the world to tell you your identity.

And yet, so many of us do just that. We let the world tell us who we are, what is expected of us, and how we are to live. The result is lostness, anger, resentment and bitterness. And the result of that is words that leak out of us that are unkind, that tear others down and build ourselves up. Because we don't know who we really are.

The answer to our problem of words is the gospel. The gospel tells us who we really are. I am a sinner saved by Grace. I am a child of the king. I am chosen and I am redeemed and I am called to show and share the love of God every day in every way.

Now, in light of those truths do you know what I have in my heart? I have joy, I have gratitude, I have humility. I have words of love – because my redeemer says I am a child of love.

And when I know who I truly am – I will know what kind of fruit I'm supposed to produce.

James wants you to know that if you master your words and you master your life. How do you master your words? You let him be the master of your heart.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Faith Works: Tongue Tamer"

July 7th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: James 3:1-12

By Rev. Mike Putnam

We've all heard the saying,

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words...can kill me." Well, that's my version, but I think it's a little more accurate.

Our words are our primary way of communicating. We've got other ways, but nothing is more effective than words. Words can convey nuance and detail. Words can be precise, they can cut to the heart of a matter, words can elicit a response.

In fact, we humans need our words. Our words are so important to us, and the words of others have a kind of power over us.

Think of a time in your life when someone's words affected you. A time when a parent, a friend, a relative said something that you'll never forget. Those words – maybe spoken in haste or in fury – long forgotten by the speaker continue to echo in the heart of the hearer.

But then think of a time when someone sent you a nice card or a thoughtful note with kind words. What do we do with those? We save them, we treasure them, because those words touched us and impacted our whole being. Words of heartfelt encouragement have the power to heal and to restore us.

Solitary confinement, on the other hand, is such an awful punishment because there's no one to talk to. There's no exchange of words there.

In the book of Genesis, we learn that God created the cosmos with the power of his Word. Jesus, we're told in the Gospel of John, is the "Word made flesh." There's something about words that has the power to create from nothing, to build up and to

heal.

So, this morning James wants us to recognize the power and seriousness of our words. Last week we heard that we show evidence of our faith by what we do (by our deeds). Today, James wants us to show evidence of our faith by what we say (by our words).

When I was a teen first learning to drive, I remember by dad saying that a car is like a weapon. "Really, a dangerous weapon," I thought? How can that be? Carelessly operated, aggressively used, and this simple means of transportation has the potential to kill and destroy. And this morning James wants us to know that so do your words.

But more than simply having the potential to do harm, our words actually reveal something profound. Or words reveal something about us. They show the condition of your heart. They demonstrate the state of your soul. James wants us to know, what every therapist instinctively knows, that the words you use are a window to your internal and spiritual condition.

Why does he say that? James says, "Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."

And what James is saying is that your words demonstrate who you really are. Your words are the fruit of your internal condition. A healthy apple tree produces apples, a healthy grapevine produces grapes, and a healthy Christian produces words of grace and love.

But James says there's a problem.

He says, “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.” Anyone here able to say only kind things? Anyone here able to say only gentle words? Anyone here able to be encouraging all of the time?

Ever taken a tongue test? It’s kind of like an inventory of your words. For the next week or so just monitor the things you say. How often, over the course of a week, do you boast about yourself? How often do you speak words of gossip? How often do you defend or excuse your behaviour? How often do you run someone down?

Take a tongue test and I bet you’ll be surprised. And not in a good way! Because if you actually listen yourself, I bet you’ll find, like I did, that our words are so often unkind, ungentle, unencouraging. We so often use words to tear down, to belittle, to destroy. We use our words to manipulate, to convey annoyance, to leave someone rattled.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs us “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Why does he give us such a strange command? If people are cursing us, if people are mistreating us, shouldn’t we respond in kind? Jesus says no, do the opposite. Why? Because the words that come out of your mouth are an indication of the condition of your own soul. Don’t let the state of someone else’s wretched soul put yours in jeopardy.

So, this morning James wants us to come to terms with the power of our words. And he gives us three little illustrations to help us understand. Think your words are no big deal? Think your words don’t really matter? Look at a bit in a horse’s mouth, look at a rudder on a boat, look at a spark in a dry forest. No big deal? Relatively small

and insignificant? What harm could they do?

Small though they are – a bit, a rudder and a spark have the potential to steer the whole thing in a bad direction. Insignificant as they seem, those little things can be the cause of great destruction.

Words are like toxic chemicals. Even though they are buried deep and you hide them away out of sight, they have a tendency to leach out – to show up in the cracks of life. They seep out into our living in unhealthy ways.

There’s a funny little story that gets told in my family. Quite a few years ago now it was early December and the excitement about Christmas was building in our household. The kids were thrilled that it was time to put up our Christmas tree and hang our stockings on the mantle.

I was excited too – I mean who isn’t excited about Christmas? But as a minister Christmas is actually a pretty stressful time. It’s a season of great expectation. And I was feeling it. Not only did I feel the pressure to pull off Christmas for my own family (making it a magical time for the kids) but I felt the pressure to create meaningful, uplifting and inspiring experiences for the whole congregation and our children and youth programs too. It’s a season of high demands and little extra time to make it all happen.

So, I had taken the kids and we had got a tree (one more thing on an already burdened Christmas to-do list) and I was wrestling with the lights and trying to get it to remain upright in those flimsy little floor stands. It had already fallen over twice by the time we had the tree fully decorated.

Annoyed and discouraged, I decided that I was in such a foul mood that I’d just go lie down and try to wrestle my negative thoughts into submission. But just

as I was starting to relax, I heard in the living room a great crash. The sound of glass ornaments smashing, water spilling, branches breaking. It brought out the worst in me. My frustration, anxiety and annoyance about Christmas found its escape.

“I hate Christmas” I declared as my children watched me wrestle the tree back into an upright position. This event was later reported in detail to the whole Sunday school. “My dad says he hates Christmas.” “Isn’t your dad the minister?”

But see, our words reveal the state of our soul.

So, what’s the answer? What solution does James have for us – those of us who have a tendency to speak an unkind word here or there? Well, in a nutshell James’s solution is that if you can master your words, you can master your life. Your words are so impactful, so powerful, so effective that if you can change your words you can change your whole heart.

Sounds easy enough, doesn’t it? Except, here’s the thing. James says, “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

“No human being can tame the tongue.” Well, that doesn’t sound very helpful. That’s not exactly handy advice! It can’t be done! It’s not a “practice makes perfect” kind of thing. There’re no handy tricks, little tricks of the trade. Try this, do that, give this a whirl, and ba-da-bing ba-da-boom your tongue is tamed! Nope, James says you’re done before you start. Your tongue can’t be tamed.

And the reason he says that is because there are two functions of the sinful tongue that are inevitable. He says,

“Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.” And he says, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.” The issue is our boasting and our cursing.

Why do we boast and curse? Because we’re insecure. Because we think that by putting others down and talking ourselves up, we will look good to others and feel better about ourselves. We’re fragile. We’re afraid of what others will say about us. And that fear and insecurity results in words of boasting and cursing.

And at first glance it might appear that this text simply leaves us hanging. So, there’s a problem and there’s no solution? Our words will always reveal the state of our soul and “no human being can tame the tongue?” Come on James, you’ve got to do better than that! Where’s the helpful advice? Where’s the practical application?

But look closer at verse 9. “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

And James is right. You can’t praise God with your words and curse God’s image bearers at the same time. That is an incongruity that needs to be understood.

And what James is saying is that key to dealing with our heart’s insecurities and rage is not some trick of the trade – try a little harder – be a little more careful with your words. That can never work for very long. Eventually the toxic ooze in our hearts will leak. The answer is to praise God with your tongue until your heart is realigned – until the gospel gets in so deep inside that it changes your hearts condition.

That’s what the gospel does. The