



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Power of Our Words
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

September 13, 2009
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
James 3:1-12

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Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 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.

Late Thursday morning, September 3rd, I found myself standing in the serving line at the cafeteria at EMU trying to make sense of what I was being asked. I had understood every word that the person at the cash register had spoken, but I couldn't fathom how they went together in the context. Glancing at the line that was backing up behind me, she repeated her question in a way that I couldn't miss it: "Do you get the senior citizen discount?"

It was the first time anyone had ever asked me that question, and I've got to tell you it shook me a bit. It might not have been so bad if it had been some college student sitting behind the counter—I'm sure I look ancient to them—but the person asking the question was on the far side of 70 herself, so I would have thought I might look to her like some college kid who simply forgot my student ID. She really should have been more careful with her words. And I've got to tell you, I had to work awfully hard to keep from saying the first thing that popped into my mind that morning.

Now there's nothing wrong at all with being eligible for the senior citizen discount. I'm actually looking forward to it. But her words created a new world for me that I wasn't prepared for. When I went hiking with Rachel and Sarah over Labor Day weekend, just as I was about to perform a challenging maneuver along Bear Fence Trace, I heard her voice, "You know," she seemed to be saying as I prepared to jump, "that looks like it's a bit too challenging for someone getting the discount."

When I got out of bed the next morning, my back stiff and my legs aching, I heard the voice again, "I tried to warn you, Mr. Discount. You shouldn't be doing that stuff."

It was just a simple question, but those humble words fashioned a world that was doing its best to define my actions and attitudes. The truth is, you could be 100 years old and still have the ability and desire to do the things I was beginning to tell myself I was now too old to do. I had been given some words, but those words had the power to create a whole world in which I was being asked to live.

It was just a few weeks ago, during the sermon series from the book of Proverbs, that we discovered together that living wisely and well requires watching what we say, and how we say it. There is no doubt that wisdom and being careful with our speech go together. Given that, it shouldn't surprise us that James—the wisdom literature of the New Testament—would also offer some words of wisdom about words and their power.

To be honest, I wondered if it was a bit too soon for another sermon on the power of our words, but I quickly set those fears aside. It was clear in that first sermon that I had touched a nerve, and I've got to say that the response to that sermon was interesting to say the least. So many people said it was just the sermon that was needed, but almost exclusively the one making that observation meant that it was just the sermon that was needed—not for them, but for somebody else. In fact, more than one married person whispered to me while pointing at the spouse, "I'm so glad he or she was here for that one." In other words, everybody thought learning to watch what we say and how we say it is a marvelous idea, but, at least for the most part, it was an idea that people thought others needed to hear more than they did.

If the past few weeks have shown us anything, however, it's that we have a long way to go in controlling the tongue. We've seen town hall forums disintegrate into shouting matches. Not only that, we've also seen an outburst during a presidential speech that reminds us of what James affirms—namely, that leaders need to be especially careful because we judge our leaders with greater strictness.

The simple truth is that we need to watch our mouths so that we don't look foolish or boorish or come across as unmannered and undisciplined scoundrels. But there is a truth hidden below that surface that makes it infinitely more important that we watch what we say and how we say it. That hidden truth is that reality that our words create worlds in which we have to live.

That brief cafeteria encounter brought that truth into focus: Words have power to create worlds. And, if you recall how the book of James has the habit of saying things we already know, it's not surprising that he tells us the same thing in our text for today. Words have power, James tells us, and you have to be careful whether your words are building up or tearing down. As Marilyn McEntyre puts it in her new book called *Caring*

for *Words in a Culture of Lies*, we can mis-use, abuse, or distort the words we speak, or we can use them in the way they are intended to be used, as “bearers of truth and as instruments of love” (McEntyre, 1).

I want to offer three suggestions—or assignments—that we can do to gain control of our tongues and to start using our words in the way they’re intended—“as bearers of truth and instruments of love.” So, here’s what I plan to do this week, and I invite you to join me.

The first one may seem strange at first, but it’s really at the heart of learning to speak wisely and well. Here’s the first assignment: commit to the hard work of listening. Several months ago, *Blue Ridge Country Magazine* had a guest essay by Kathy Mattea, a country singer you have probably listened to. I’ve always liked her music, but I have found it even more powerful since reading her words in that article.

She made reference to the deeply conflicted conversation going on in West Virginia about mountain top removal by the coal companies. Here’s what she wrote about that: “I have strong opinions about the beauty and diversity of those mountains, and the injustices that surround this issue. But I also sense an opportunity here, a chance to make a different kind of choice, and resist the urge to add one more strident voice to this raging conflict. I believe we can only begin to save our mountains, our planet and ourselves when we dig deep into our hearts and honestly stop judging one another long enough to *understand* one another... Everyone wants to be heard. But if we want to be heard, we must strive to hear. We must have the discipline to sit in an uncomfortable dialogue and try to keep from blaming or defending when the fear and anger rise up. It’s hard not to walk away from the table when emotions run high. Can we create a safe and frank discussion without a running public commentary? Can we become willing to let the unresolved tensions hang in the air for a bit? Can we learn to love our ‘enemies?’”

To commit to the hard work of listening is to really listen to the other, and not simply be rehearsing your next words to speak when they finally stop talking. And it means learning not to vilify the other just because you don’t agree.

Second, figure out someone that you can write to thank them for what they mean to you and that you’re glad they’re part of your life. Perhaps you’ll write a letter to a professor whose teaching shaped your life. Perhaps you’ll write a letter to a member of your family and leave it someplace where they’ll find it or mail it to them if they live away. Or perhaps you’ll stick a note in your child’s lunchbox or slip a message to the teacher in the homework folder. The possibilities are endless, of course, but imagine the world your gratefulness will create in the life of someone else.

And third, try to find someone to bless. Several years ago I was on the receiving end of a surprise blessing. I had been talking with the Catholic priest from a neighboring parish, and the whole conversation had been a gift of grace. Just as I was about to leave, he reached out his hands—placing one hand on my shoulder and the other on my head. And then, without any notice, he blessed me in the name of Christ: "Remember that you are loved. Remember that the ministry we share in this neighborhood is life-giving. Don't forget how much God loves you just because you are alive. You are God's beloved child. And may God's peace be with you as you go."

Though I have long-forgotten the exact words of Father Breen's blessing, it was something close to that. But while I may have forgotten the spoken words, I can still sense his blessing sounding deep within me and reminding me who I am. Some days I can even feel the weight of his hands, just as I still feel the hands placed upon me at my ordination.

Symbolically, I get to do for the gathered congregation at the close of worship each week what Father Breen did for me. I lift my arms in blessing and announce the same good news of God's deep and abiding presence and peace in each of our lives. It has always been one of the most powerful acts I offer as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament.

I can't help but wonder, however, about what a difference it would make in our life together if we could recover the art of blessing. And I'm not just talking about the "official" blessings in our worship, but the blessing each of us can share with those around us day after day in the simple and profound moments of our life.

To invoke a blessing—aloud or in your heart—is to open the door to transformation. In blessing someone else, we offer them the much-needed reminder that they are loved and cherished by a God who loves them and will not let them go. Those beautiful words create a beautiful world, and, by our blessing, we are inviting them to live in that world created by our words of blessing.

But you know what else? There's also room in that world of blessing for us to live as well. May God grant us the courage and the desire to listen, to be grateful, and to pronounce blessings upon this world so that our life together is marked by truth and beauty and love.