

“Into the Fray: Sticks, Stones, and Words”

James 3:1-12

February 3, 2019

Have you heard of the six-word memoir? It is a project launched several years ago by SMITH magazine which invites ordinary people to distill their lives down to the six words that describe what is most important or interesting about them. A website features many examples, and several collections have been published in book form. The very first six-word memoir was, “Not Quite What I Was Planning.” The comedian and late-night host Stephen Colbert offered this memoir, “Well, I Thought It Was Funny.” Many are good for a laugh: “Google knows me. Therefore I am.” Others are poignant, “Extremely responsible. Secretly longed for spontaneity. A few are heartbreaking: “I Still Make Coffee for Two.”

Words are powerful. They have the potential to move us to tears or to action. They inspire our hope and provoke our anger. A few words can transform our lives forever. Simple sentences strung together mark our most significant moments. Congratulations. You’ve been accepted. I’m sorry to inform you. Will you marry me? This just isn’t working anymore. It’s a girl. I’ve missed you. I’m sorry. I forgive you. The test showed there’s something wrong. He’s coming home. She’s gone home.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Almost all of us heard it as children. It’s one of those sayings that we pass on with determination even though, or perhaps *because* we know that it is not true. We must brace ourselves against the harm caused by words precisely because they are so powerful, and can do so much damage. So we contrast the intangible impact of words with the physical harm caused by actual weapons, and then we pretend that only the wounds that show up on our bodies demonstrate real pain.

All the while so many of us walk through life bearing the scars of words spoken in anger, judgment, hatred, or derision. The power of language is just as apparent in the culture we inhabit, where words are used to tear down and destroy with alarming frequency and almost no negative consequence for the speaker. What has become of us?

Last summer, I spent a week in the mountains of North Carolina. You were on my heart and mind. One of my projects that week was to plan our worship calendar for the year ahead. I brought all kinds of resources for the task—Bibles and Biblical commentaries, theology texts and novels, liturgical resources, calendars, and spreadsheets of previous years at Second. I was eager to dive into the work, but I made myself pause before I did. The first morning, I went on a long run. I had a cup of coffee. I spent time in prayer for this congregation and in discernment about what God might be saying to us this year and how we might be encouraged to live the faith in this moment in time. In that spirit, this week we begin a new series, *Into the Fray*, in which we will seek a faithful and scriptural path to understanding some of the troubling divisions of our time in the church and the world. We will ask together what message we might have to offer and how we can live the faith we profess here and now. I think it is important and essential for people of Christian faith to be in dialogue with one another and with those outside our congregation about the significant and even divisive issues that we face. I want to be part of a church that engages in constructive and impactful ways with the world around us. I feel deeply that we are called to do this even when it is uncomfortable. I trust that God walks with us even when we challenge ourselves and each other, perhaps especially then. But I also felt called to begin this series with a reminder for all of us about the power of words, the impact of the way we talk to and about each other. Before we dive in, I want us to pause. I want us to consider how we Christians are called to speak.

The book of James offers a helpful corrective to religion that has become overly abstract and theoretical. James won’t let us get too distant in our reflection on faith—he is constantly pulling us back to the concrete and the real. As a colleague of mine has written, “Nothing is too small or too unimportant for James to consider it an arena of God’s activity and our faithful action.”ⁱ

Take this morning’s passage for example. For twelve verses, James offers us a mini-essay on the power of our

words. His reflection gives a direct contrast to our nursery rhyme wisdom about sticks, stones, and words. Instead, James suggests that words and speech are among the most powerful forces in the universe, *and* that they are within our control.

I imagine James would have been an intense person to be caught next to at a dinner party! The tongue is a spark, capable of setting our lives ablaze with the very fires of hell. Well, he has our attention now! And so, the final verses of the passage give us the heart of his message—how we speak and what we say matter. Within us, there is a power to create or destroy. Our words make a difference.

I think that we all know from experience how right James is; we could all recount stories that confirm the power that words have over us, often painful and personal stories.

When I was in fourth grade, my family moved to a new town. It was not an easy time for an eight-year-old, and looking back I have a sense of how concerned my parents were for me. In fact, they were concerned enough to arrange for me to move a few weeks early in order to join the church basketball team. Then as now, I loved basketball, and playing on a real team was one of the very few positives about the move. So, in early November, my father and I spent a Saturday night in our not-yet-furnished rental home. The next day, with a mix of excitement and anxiety, I got dressed and headed to basketball practice. I knew that I would be the youngest, and likely smallest, player on the team, which included middle-schoolers. I had never been to an actual practice, and I was eager to fit in. Thinking they were my coolest clothes, I put on an almost-new pair of jeans and headed to practice. The coach was welcoming and warm. He told me to go join the boys who were shooting around before practice. That's when the words were spoken. Not to me, but near me. As I walked by my new teammates, I heard one boy say to another, "jeans for basketball practice—that's a new one." Then they both laughed out loud, a hearty chuckle at my expense.

I don't think they meant to do me harm. Let's face it, blue jeans *are* an odd choice for basketball practice. But their words let me know that the choice I made hoping to fit in made me stand out instead. And not in a good way. I remember how ashamed I felt, how I could feel the heat of that shame in my cheeks as I blushed, how I didn't say a word in practice that day, how I counted the minutes until I could get back in my father's car, how I dreaded returning to

practice the next week. For weeks, I wondered what else the kids in my new town were saying about me. I never wore jeans to practice again, and I have almost never told that story. I am sure that neither one of those boys would remember speaking those words. And yet, as I've been thinking about this week's scripture and how words can wound, I keep returning to that vivid memory. And twenty-seven years later, even in this moment telling it, I can still feel the sting. Sticks and stones have nothing on the power of words.

I think this is what astonishes James. Like a spark that catches fire and burns through millions of acres of old growth forest, a few poorly conceived words have the power to upend lives. Just think of the destruction caused by words used to bully or dehumanize other human beings. The shame they cause, the crushing impact of their force. By contrast, consider the power of a kind word shared at just the right moment, an email sent just to offer gratitude, a word of affirmation for a job well done. I've seen weary souls renewed and apathetic hearts warmed by a single sentence spoken in genuine appreciation. Words matter.

James says no one can tame the tongue and sadly the proof of that is all around us. We say and do harmful things to others thoughtlessly, needlessly, and sometimes on a daily basis. Our actions, our smallest choices and actions, can carry tremendous meaning, even when we don't realize it. The challenge is made that much greater by the proliferation of communication methods in our time, many of them disembodied. Maybe you've heard the wisdom offered by many writers who publish online... "Don't read the comments." Humans can be so brutal to each other, especially when we feel no accountability for the words we speak or write. James urges us to pay attention to our words, to acknowledge their power and choose them wisely. They shape the reality we live in. By things as small as a bit or a rudder, great beasts and massive ships are steered.

So it is with words in our lives. The smallest changes can transform the direction we are headed in dramatic ways. And that's good news. Because sometimes we don't know where to start with this immense call of being a Christian. Sometimes we don't know where to begin in a world gone wrong in so many ways. Sometimes we don't know how to heal the wounds of words. In those moments, James says, just try to speak with love. James echoes the wisdom of a preschool teacher urging her students—"use your words."

In times like ours, when words are used to divide and

defeat, when angry and hostile shouting dominates the narrative, I'm convinced that the words we speak in this place matter more than ever. We need them now more than ever before. Words like, "All are welcome." Words like, "Child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Words like, "We are forgiven." Words like, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace."

Use your words—with love and care. If you can do that and you can steer giant ships and tame wild animals and put out the very fires of hell. Words **matter**. Especially in times like these, where differences too easily divide people rather than perspectives. The language you use, the conversations you have, the observations you make, the stories you tell, the harsh comment you leave unspoken, the tenderness you share, they offer God plenty to work with.

Words. They are far more powerful than sticks or stones, and their impact lasts far longer. As we go into the fray of divisive issues or daily life, the words we choose will determine the way we live, and the impact we have on others.

One word at a time, chosen with care and spoken in love. That's how we live this faith. Amen.

ⁱ These words, and other ideas in this sermon, come from a wonderful paper by my colleague Rev. Sarah Wiles, prepared for our *By The Vine* preaching group.