



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 September 15, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “The Story We Live By”

James 3:1-12 (NRSV)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will face stricter judgment. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, 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 and are driven by strong winds, 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 such 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 life, 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 people made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes a blessing and a 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.

“The Story We Live By”

This week, my life has been consumed by the difference between two seemingly nonsense words: 12U and 10U.

Is anyone here familiar with the difference between 12U and 10U? Turns out, if you are the parent of an 8-year-old interested in baseball in Knox County, you better know the difference! And two months ago, sadly I did not.

Inadvertently over the summer, I signed my aspiring 8-year-old baseball player, who until this year had barely ever touched a baseball, up for the 12-year-old, major leagues. No big deal, I told myself. He's tall for his age. How big of a difference is there between an 8 and a 12-year-old? Turns out, it's a big difference! It's a big deal!

He's holding his own, but after his first game Monday night in the 12U majors, he looked at me, his eyes wide, and said, 'Wow, dad, they are throwing that ball really fast!'

Realizing my mistake, I emailed the league to see if there was still room on an under-10 team. But you already know the answer to that question. This is Knox County, where tens of thousands of children sign up for sports. Of course, there's no more room.

So, it's been a week of parental guilt.

On Tuesday night, I was talking about my son being in the 12U league to the Worship council before the meeting got started. The chair of that council, whose kids have been playing baseball for years, looked at me amazed and asked why my 8-year-old wasn't in the 10U league. So, of course, I lied. I couldn't say, because 'I'm a clueless parent who didn't know what those words mean, so I signed him up for the wrong league.' I just panicked and said, 'Well, they wouldn't let him in the 10U!'

So now, not only have I messed up my child's fall baseball experience, but also, I've started out our ministry team season lying to the chair of our Worship Council!

It hasn't been my most shining week.

The point is that words matter. They shape our reality, not just how we perceive this world, but also how we move within it. The words 10U and 12U have taken over my life this week.

What words have taken over your life this week?

The tongue is a fire, says James. It is a small thing – a spark. But all it takes is a spark to set a whole forest ablaze.

The tongue, he says, is like a bit, in the mouth of a horse, or like the rudder on a ship, so small yet it directs us where to go. *So also, the tongue is... small, yet it boasts of great exploits.*

Our words shape our world, says James.

And he said that even before the invention of the printing press, much less Snapchat or Instagram – where a snide comment or a rumor could turn a teenager's life upside down almost instantly.

And James could never have imagined what happened last Tuesday night: 67 million Americans sat down simultaneously all to watch a Presidential debate – 90 minutes of words.

And in just 3 of those minutes the town of Springfield, Ohio became the center of everyone's attention, and every immigrant in this country felt just a little bit, and some felt quite a bit, more unsafe.

Our words shape our world, says James.
What words have shaped your world, this week?

If *'the tongue is a fire,'* then fires can be used, either to destroy or to build up. They can run wild and blanket the west in smoke, or their power can be harnessed, to warm up a room or light up a city. It matters, says James, what we do with our words.

With [them], we [can] bless the Lord...and with [them], we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

James sounds like a high school principal, or a youth minister or a college chaplain, because he can see how words shape our understanding of ourselves in real time. Or maybe he sounds here more like a counselor or psychologist, as he understands the scars that words can leave behind, even decades after they have been spoken.

James reminds us words are never just words.
They shape lives.

They can define who we are, how we think, what we do.

On Wednesday morning, Gradye, Barbara, and I were at a Presbytery wide training at Camp John Knox. As the meeting was getting started, I found myself chewing over this week's lectionary readings:

The tongue is a fire.

And then our executive presbyter and Westminster community member, the Rev. Dr. Wendy Neff began our meeting. And she started by telling us two things:

First, she reminded us that the day was September 11.

And I thought: there it is, a fire started by words.

I remembered, as we do every year on that day, where I was, when I heard the news, of planes flying into the Twin Towers, twenty-three years ago. I remembered; how words of terror can bring whole towers down. And in the wake of their collapse, two decades of war. The tongue is a fire, says James

And then Wendy noted that just the day before, there was a county wide alert, because threats had been made against Knox County schools. And she said a 7th grader had been arrested, for making threats against one of our schools. And the whole room, just let out a sigh. Because there were no words to say, after hearing that news.

That student wouldn't be the only one, by the way. By the end of the next day, the paper reported the arrest of 15 Knox County students, some as young as 11-years-old, for making threats, on our schools.¹ On Wednesday, attendance in schools across our county was down by a quarter, as online threats across the nation skyrocketed.

The tongue is a fire, says James.

With it, we bless the Lord...and with it, we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

¹ Areena Arora, "As KCS is drawn into national surge in hoax threats to schools, arrests of local kids hits 15." *Knoxville News Sentinel*. September 12, 2024. <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/news/crime/2024/09/12/15-knox-county-schools-students-arrested-in-less-than-a-week/75197895007/>

Words create worlds, and we all live, perhaps most of the time,

- in worlds created by words that curse and divide,
- stories of division,
- stories of ‘us versus them.’

Most of the time, we live in stories, where the plot is not love and grace, but blame, shame, and discord.

We all know this – just look at our election. We are all sharing in a national story of division. Whose side are you on?

Look at our schools. We are in a national epidemic of violence and mass shootings. And what do we do in response? We draw lines: Us and them. Are you for gun control or the second amendment? Apparently, you have to pick a side. That’s what we do, isn’t it?

Instead of uniting around a solution, we pick a side.

One of the things that surprised me, by the way, about Gradye’s sermon last week, was he found a way to speak about a school shooting, in a way that was both meaningful and at the same time, wasn’t divisive. *I didn’t know you could do that!*

He didn’t tell us what to do. But he told us to do something, whether it’s on guns, mental health, bullying – you name it. Do something, because what we’re doing – which is just arguing amongst ourselves, sure doesn’t seem to be working. In fact, its teaching our children, that the way to act like an adult, is to pick a fight. Like it’s just another story of versus them.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing, says James.

The answer, by the way, is not to stop talking. James, after all, uses a lot of words. But with them, he shapes reality in a different way. He gives us another story to live by.

It’s a story where: *Mercy triumphs over judgment.* James ch. 2

And The wisdom from above is...peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. James ch. 3

So what do we do? We: *Draw near to God, and God...draw[s] near to [us].* James chapter 4

James, with his many words, draws us into a story, about how the God of grace has come near to us in Jesus Christ, not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but [so] that the world might be saved. John 3:17.

- Funny that we often forget that next line, after John 3:16?

For James, the story of our faith is not another story of ‘us against them.’ It is instead, the story of God *for and with* us, all of us – all! The creator saying *yes* to creation.

This *yes* does not mean, of course, that God does not say *no*, also. But God’s *no* to us is always in service of God’s *yes* for us. God says *no* to our partiality, our division, our hate, our violence.

For example, James writes that:

If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there,’ or ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts. James, ch. 2.

God says *no* to our distinctions, so that God can say *yes* to us all. You see in the gospels too, over and over. Jesus says *no* to human arrogance, bigotry, and hate. He turns us back toward one another.

As we draw lines, over and over again, with religious bigotry, and sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, all the other *ism*’s, we employ, to tell our stories of division. And over and over again, God says *no*, there isn’t a divide. God says *no* to our human propensity to horde and to ostracize. God will leave the 99, after all, in order to save the 1. Why? Because we are all siblings in Christ, not enemies of one another.

This is the story of the gospel. It is not a story of damnation, but of salvation.

This story tells us, that no one is a *them*; no one is a problem. There are words and actions, patterns and systems of this world, that separate us from one another and the will of God for our lives. And God says *no* to those stories and those systems.

But God never says there's something fundamentally wrong with you or with anyone else. The message of Scripture that there's something fundamentally right:

with you,
with each of us,
even each one of *them*,
 whoever the *them* is, in your story.

Because the story of God is bigger. It's the story that says, that the *us*'s and the *them*'s of this world, are really united, because we all in this together, the beloved children of God.

God is just trying over and over again to turn our heads and make us see that, make us see that we are all in this together, the beloved children of God.

Can you see that?
Can you live that?

Because, this world is hurting, and our problems seem impossible, and the divide is growing wider, each and every day. So, if we're going to make it, we've got to stop telling stories that push us away from one another.

We've got to stop blessing God out of one corner of our mouth and then cursing one another out the other. Instead, we've got to start telling stories that help us see each other's common humanity.

That's why we come here, after all. That's why we come here, to remind ourselves, and to remind each other, of the story we live by.

That story says, it is not 'you against me.' It is not 'us against them.' It is only 'us.'
All of humanity, is only an 'us.'
And we belong to each other.
Because we all belong to God.

There's a lot of words out there. But in God's story, the Word is love and redemption; the Word is grace and salvation.²

It is the story of our lives.
Let us live, like it is the story of our lives.
Amen.

² Here, I am echoing the final words on this passage offered by Martha L. Moore-Keish in her commentary *James* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 129: "Speak we must; but God's word – which is love and righteousness, mercy and redemption – that Word always comes first."