

What You Can Do with Words

James 3:1-12

We use many expressions that seem to diminish or limit the power of words. When one child hurts another with name-calling or bullying, the victim might say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” If another person—a spouse, a community leader, a pastor—makes extravagant promises, you might say (or, at least, think), “Talk is cheap. What counts is action.” Do you remember the song, “Show Me” from *My Fair Lady*? Eliza Doolittle considers the promises of Freddie and the badgering of Professor Higgins and cries out, “Words, words, words—I’m too sick of words. Words all day through—first from him, now from you. Is that all you braggarts can do?” And there is the warning we issue to each other when we doubt the truth of what a person is saying: “Watch what he says.”

We are wary of words, and well we should be. We are bombarded by words in lectures, instructions, speeches, sermons, news, and conversation. We don’t know what to believe, and often we don’t know when we should even listen. So words take on less importance to us. If you look at e-mails and text messages, you find that most people don’t bother to spell words correctly, and if you listen to what we say to each other, you find that often we don’t use them correctly. It is very seldom today that I find a high school or college student who says that English is his favorite subject. We can’t do without words, but most people are not too interested in them.

I notice these things because I love words. Words hold for me a mysterious bond between experience and idea. Some combinations of words move me to tears. Some of you, I know, share that feeling. We counter that words do mean something and that words are important.

James thought so! Almost one-fifth of the book bearing his name has to do with the tongue and with words and speech. It is a major topic. Some will ask why that would be the case with James or why we should have a sermon on a subject that seems to be trivial in today's world. When there are so many overwhelming moral issues such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, drug abuse, war, racism, and health care problems, why talk and think about words?

James answers that question by saying that perhaps words used wrongly and deceitfully and hurtfully have at least caused these problems to fester. In the health care debate alone over recent weeks we have seen persons on different sides of issues willfully using words to distort the positions of their opponents and then using that incendiary word "liar" to describe someone on the other side. Maybe words are more important here than we think.

James says that little things often exercise control over bigger things. A bit in the mouth of a horse can make the powerful animal do what the rider wishes. A small rudder can keep a ship steady in strong winds and waves. A great forest can be set ablaze by a small flame. The tongue is like that. It is, James writes, a "small member, yet it boasts of great exploits."

We have been comparing the subjects and moral imperatives in James with those of Jesus. Notice what Jesus said about words: "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt. 12:36-37); "Whoever calls his brother 'good for nothing' deserves the sentence of the court; whoever calls him 'fool' deserves hell-fire" (Mt. 5:22); Use simple speech, Jesus taught, "Plain 'Yes' or 'No' is all you need to say; anything beyond that comes from the evil one" (Mt. 5:37). Jesus had a pretty strong view of the importance of words himself.

Words and speech are gifts. They enable us to preserve and appreciate what has happened and to convey ideas to others. Words can be tools or instruments. But there's more than that. Words help us communicate feelings. We express love, confess faith, give encouragement, and talk out our fears and problems. Words are powerful.

James here refers to abuses of words and difficulties that come through careless speech. Let's take the positive approach. How can speech be a force for good? How can our words build up lives around us? Just what can you do with words?

Take the obvious issue first. Words can lead us to the truth about ourselves and our world. If we are to appreciate words and what they do, we must distinguish how words can lead to truth or to falsehood. We know that the truth can be slanted, and we all learn very early to tell things from our perspective. If you are a political liberal, you don't watch Fox News. If you are a political conservative, you don't follow what's being written on MoveOn.org.

Beyond shading the truth, we learn about "white lies" and "black lies." A "black lie" is a statement we know to be false, a statement designed to deceive. A "white lie" is a statement that is not completely true or false but omits a significant part of the truth in the aim to distort. The CIA, I read somewhere, has a more elaborate classification system. It defines white, black, and gray lies. A gray lie is a statement that contains a white lie and a black lie. The CIA also has the black black lie. That's a black lie attributed to another source.

We live in a world where lying is common. An article I saw recently said that each of us lies in some form about 200 times a day. How much do you really believe in the commercials you hear on television? We say that our leaders don't tell the truth, but we still listen. How do you survive in that kind of environment? You recognize it for what it is; you use reliable guidelines for

knowing yourself and others, and you seek the inspiration of the Christ who leads us to the truth.

The devices we see around us are not new. In Jesus' time scholars debated the meaning of truthfulness. The commandment stated very clearly, "You shall not bear false witness," or, "You shall not lie." However, that was too stark. The Jewish legalists began to work on the problem, and this is the formula they worked out. In order to make certain that a person was telling the truth, he could call God as his witness. If he did that, he was taking an oath or making a vow. In time it was felt that a person might lie under oath and thus discredit God. So persons were encouraged to swear not by God but by the Temple, the altar, or even heaven or earth. You can guess what this did. If a witness did not have to worry about dishonoring God, lying was made much easier. That's why Jesus said to forget oaths and vows and just tell the truth.

Words can help us find our way to the truth and that can set us free.

Words can also create and re-create. Notice something interesting here. James was thinking about God's intent for us. In verse nine, he refers to our being made in the "likeness of God," and in verse seven he alludes to man's naming and taming of "beasts and birds and reptiles and sea creatures." The creation stories say that God allowed man to name and to control things within the created order. Do words not do that? Give something a name and you are on the way to understanding it. Without words we can continue the creation of God!

And with our words we can make things live in the present. I learned a phrase in seminary that has stuck with me through the years. It is this: "The word becomes event." For me that means that when you and I faithfully tell the story of Jesus, it is no longer a historical occurrence but a present reality. Our

words make Christ alive! Or, more properly spoken, our words make us aware of the Christ who is alive among us.

For James God created by his word. We are gifted in that we also can create or re-create by the words we use.

Third, and perhaps on a day by day basis the most important, with our words we can bless or curse the lives of everyone around us. From the same mouth, James says, come blessings and curses. If for no other reason than this we watch what we say, it would be enough. I cite two contemporary examples. I don't know much about Michael Jackson except that he lived a tragic life that came to a tragic end. For the past twenty or so years I simply thought he was weird. After his death I read that his father told him over and over that he was ugly and that his nose was too big. Multiple surgeries could change his appearance but could not change his self-image. If the account I read is accurate, the father's words cursed Michael Jackson's life.

Contrast that with the blessing that Edward Kennedy said that he got from his father. In his autobiography Kennedy said that he had made many mistakes in his life. He was kicked out of Harvard for cheating. He behaved with complete irresponsibility in the Chappaquiddick incident. He had other personal struggles. At each point, he said, his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, told him, "You can get through this." Edward Kennedy said that his life was blessed with two principles his father instilled in him. One is that you always look on the positive side of things. The other is that you never give up. Words like that can be the blessing a person needs.

Sometimes we can bless ourselves with words. Tony Campolo writes that when he joined the faculty of an ivy league university early in his career, he and his wife were expected to attend get-togethers with colleagues and spouses. Once he overheard a fellow professor describe in detail the work he was doing

and the importance it held. Finally, in a feigned tone of politeness, he asked (a little snobbishly), "And what is it that you do, my dear?" She was rearing their two children as a stay at home mom at the time. All she could think of was, "Oh, I'm just a housewife and mother." But Peggy Campolo learned the ropes quickly. At the next cocktail party, when a professor came over to talk about himself, she took charge. She said, "Let me tell you about my work. I am socializing two homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition so that they might be transformers of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God willed for us from the foundation of the world." Then she smiled and said, "And what is it that you do?" The inquirer look flustered and mumbled, "Oh, I just teach sociology."

Words have amazing power. You can do wonderful things with words. You can destroy lives with words. You can destroy yourself with words. You can redeem yourself with words.

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13 September 2009