

4-2 Humble Ourselves Before God – Our Words Hurt

James 3; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Facebook post – Old man who spread rumors about neighbor. In court the judge told him to write all statements on paper, cut into small pieces, and let the wind scatter the pieces. When the man returned to court the next day, the judge told the man pick up each piece of paper. The man protested, “The pieces have been blown so far, I won’t be able to find all of them.” Our words, once uttered, scattered and can never be taken back

FBC is a small congregation: we average 45 in attendance with as few as 30 and as many as 55 to 60. In this small congregation, three people have shared with me the damage done by the harsh words spoken to them by others in this very congregation. Words hurt. Whether intentionally spoken or thoughtlessly expressed, the words we speak have power to destroy or build up.

Jewish writer Jesus ben Sirach – Ecclesiasticus 28:17

Sirach: The stroke of the whip makes marks in the flesh;

But the stroke of the tongue breaks bones

Children’s rhyme: Sticks and stones may break my bones

But words will never hurt me

Sirach reminds us, our words can hurt.

And you’ve heard the term “tongue-lashing;” we whip others with the strokes of our tongues.

One more example: think of a dog that has been beaten by its caregiver. Its spirit is broken. It cowers in the presence of that person. We know of people who behave in the very same ways: children who have been verbally berated by parents or teachers, adults who have been berated by supervisors, colleagues and maybe even friends. Perhaps even members of a church congregation.

Words can destroy; words hurt! They can tear down or they can build up. In the New Testament book of James we read about the power of the tongue: the power of what is spoken, of words.

The context for James 3 is set in verses 1-2: James is speaking to those who serve as teachers, specifically teachers within the local congregation. I don’t think it is a stretch to broaden the context to those who serve in leadership of the local congregation. When you serve in leadership, you become a visible role model for how to live as a Christian. And I don’t 1

think it is a stretch to broaden the context even further to include all of those who call themselves Christians—to all of us. Each time we talk with another, whether that one is a fellow believer or not, we are teaching that other one what a Christian believes, says and does. Matthew 28 19-20 tells us to “Go, make disciples, baptizing and teaching all I (Jesus) have taught you.” James is writing to each one of us.

James describes the power of the tongue with two comparisons, found in verses 3-5. By putting a bit into a horse’s mouth, a rider can direct where a horse is to go. A comparatively small rudder can be used to turn a large ship. The tongue is only a small part of the human body but the damage done can be huge.

Verses 5-6 describe how much damage can be done, just by the tongue. Here James is comparing the tongue to a fire that gets out of control. About six weeks ago, a prairie fire swept across parts of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas. Several thousand people had to be evacuated from the north part of the Kansas town in which I lived in the 1970s. A wild fire, once started, spreads uncontrollably. The hurt caused by an unkind statement also spreads. And we now have the capability to spread harsh words through social media. The damage goes far and wide, just as in the story at the beginning of this message.

James warns us that the tongue is hard to control. In verses 7-8 James contrasts how we can tame even the wildest beasts, but we can’t tame the tongue. I spent several days this past week at Potter Park Zoo in Lansing. On Thursday, the third-graders I spent the week with were allowed into 2 the rhino barn, an activity not available to the general zoo-goer. Each student was allowed to touch the horn of the rhinoceros, if the student chose to do so. Yes, thick bars separated the rhino and the students. Yet, the rhino stood and allowed each student to touch it. Wild beasts can be tamed to some degree. But James tells us the tongue cannot be tamed without help. A rhino, a “wild beast,” standing still while noisy, wiggly third graders lined up to touch it. Yet the human tongue cannot be tamed without help from beyond ourselves.

Verses 9-12

On Sunday mornings we sing praises to God, we pray, we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord. On Monday, we say hateful words about people whose lives we don’t understand We criticize people and groups 2

of people who aren't like us. We judge and reject those who don't live the way we say Christians must live. Yet, the people we describe with hateful words, those we reject because they don't live as we think they should, those we criticize, all of these are God's children also. Our Lord loves each of these just as God loves us. Verse 9: With our tongue we bless the Lord and Father and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. Words hurt! Our Christian witness is damaged or destroyed! We may have driven someone further from God's love and we will be held accountable.

Jaime encouraged Sutton at church each Sunday, speaking kind words, urging Sutton to seek a position on Church Council. Imagine Sutton's dismay after overhearing Jaime criticize Sutton's leadership skills to another church member. While this hasn't happened here (at FBC), we all know of someone who says one thing to a person and then something else behind their back. That's the kind of thing James means in verses 9-12 when he writes of blessing and curse coming from the same mouth: it shouldn't happen! Words hurt! Relationships are damaged.

William Barclay, Bible scholar, describes this kind of witness with four characteristics: fanatical, bitter, selfishly ambitious, arrogant. We think of those not like us, or those who have upset us in some way, as enemies worthy of annihilation. We take pride in what we believe to be our correct understanding of scripture rather than admitting we "know only in part and we prophesy only in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9). We speak with certainty and with superiority: we are absolutely right! We know what is best for everyone else and we tell them! Our certainty and superiority then allow us to judge others for being different, for not doing everything the way we want it done. Our words hurt! Our Christian witness is damaged or destroyed.

We use broad labels to identify people: poor, welfare-recipient, gay, lesbian, transgender, unmarried mother, deadbeat dad, incarcerated, old, teenage driver, radical, reactionary, the list goes on and on. If we can find a label to attach to a person, we don't have to interact with that person as a human being. I can agree with the stranger, the "good people" when the stranger fits the labels I identify with. I reject others who fit the labels I reject, the labels associated with "bad people." And then we say, "We don't have to try to share the Good News: the good people already are good Christians; the bad people, well there's no help for them!" Our **3**

nation is divided by labels, by words. Words hurt! Our Christian witness is damaged or destroyed.

Our tongue is a small part of our human body but can do more damage than we can do with our fists, our hands, our feet. Our tongue is hard to control, to tame, and is full of poison. From our mouths come both blessings and curses. Words hurt.

But James offers us hope in Chapter 3, beginning in verse 13 when he speaks of wisdom from above: heavenly wisdom. Wisdom available to us through God's Holy Spirit helps us become our better selves. God's wisdom brings peace, unity, mercy and good fruits. When we submit ourselves to God's leading, we give up our selfish ambition, our bitterness, our fanaticism, our arrogance.

Some of you might remember the Sunday message in which you received a dust mask. The message focused on putting on your own mask first, getting your own spiritual house in order before trying to tell others what to do or believe. That's what James also is telling us in this chapter. We must choose to be in relationship with God, submitting our will to God's will. That's first: putting on our own mask first. Then we must choose to foster healthy relationships with others.

James 3:17-18 calls us to build up one another in right relationships, relationships characterized by love and by mercy. Our reward comes through the way we relate with God and the ways we relate with others. Criticism, judgment, rejection do not foster healthy relationships. Rather extending love for all others, even those different from us, tempers justice with mercy. That's one aspect of good relationships. Words of love can build up!

We make mistakes and seek God's mercy. We are expected to extend that same mercy to those around us as they make mistakes. Remember the parable of the wicked debtor, found in Matthew 18:21-35? The servant owed his master several thousand dollars. Unable to pay, he begged for mercy. The master forgave his debt. Immediately, when the servant went out of the master's house, he encountered a fellow servant who owed him only few dollars. The other servant begged for mercy. But the wicked debtor refused mercy and had the servant imprisoned for his small debt. When the master learned the debtor whom he had forgiven a large debt was unmerciful to another who owed much less, the master was **4**

angry at the debtor's lack of mercy. The wicked debtor was thrown into prison.

The mercy we receive is the mercy we are to extend to others.

Verse 17 tells us God's wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits. Sometimes we dismiss others with "It's their own fault, they brought it upon themselves." For example, when we reject giving financial assistance to the poor by saying, "They're just too lazy to work." Hmm... What do you think God may be thinking about some of the choices you have made? Have you chosen to disobey God in one way or another? Are you willing to accept eternal punishment for disobeying God? For sinning? God's wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits. God sent Jesus to earth to teach us God's ways, to reconcile us with God. God acted to save us from ourselves. If God showed mercy to us, mercy we do not deserve, aren't we expected to show mercy and good fruits toward others, even those who brought it upon themselves?

Willingness to really listen to another person is another aspect of good relationships. We may have firm beliefs about what scripture teaches. But how do we foster a good relationship with someone who has a different belief? The Greek word for wisdom in verse 18 can mean "ever ready to obey" but also can mean "easy to persuade." Do you think of wisdom in the same sentence as "easy to persuade"? Some of my communication background came to mind as I was reading about Greek meanings. There is a concept known as "provisionalism" in listening: It goes like this, "I know what I believe to be true, but I will set that aside while you tell me what you believe and help me understand why you believe that way." For example, this might be a fervent Democrat saying, "OK, I'll put aside my negative beliefs about Donald Trump while you explain your reasons for supporting him as President." Or it might be a fervent Trump-supporter saying, "OK, I'll put aside my beliefs about Donald Trump while you explain your reasons for rejecting him as President." Or we could exercise provisionalism when trying to understand one another's views of LGBTQ persons, or views of those who don't see a need for church, or any one of a number of other topics about which we argue.

We can be merciful in our relationships with others—choosing words of encouragement, kindness, compassion, mercy- -or we can be like the wicked debtor and criticize, judge, reject even though we have begged 5

for mercy and have received it. We can destroy with our words or we can build up. We can destroy with our actions or we can build up.

We go back to verse 13: Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. We are to avoid being mean-spirited, boasting we are "right-thinking," trying to look more Christian than we are deep down inside. We are to humble ourselves. Our talk and our works must be done with gentleness.

Barclay's commentary on James 3 concludes: "nothing can ever grow in an atmosphere where people are at odds with one another. A group, a Church, any body of people where there is bitterness and strife is a barren and a sterile soil in which the seeds of righteousness can never grow..." Strong words warning us that we must find ways to talk and listen to build up one another, in this congregation and in our Christian walk. Christians can do no less.

Perhaps you remember hearing of Westboro Baptist Church. It is the Topeka KS church founded by Fred Phelps. Their obsession is denouncing homosexuality and other groups of people with words of hate. They have held up abusive signs at military funerals. Phelps has died but the church continues, primarily made up of extended family. Recently one of Phelps' granddaughters spoke out about why she has left the church. A news article details Megan Phelps-Roper's journey:

Megan Phelps-Roper has talked about how she was raised in the church and how she came to see how destructive it is. Phelps-Roper said her parents took her to her first protest when she was five and she didn't 6 question the church until 20 years later. As a child she participated in holding signs that said "Gays are worthy of death" and other harsh words against homosexuals and other groups. Westboro members use social media to spread their hate. Megan joined Twitter for just that reason, but she was surprised to find herself engaging in genuine conversations with those whom she had been raised to view as "enemies." "Once I saw that we were not the ultimate arbiters of divine truth, but flawed human beings," Megan said, "I couldn't pretend otherwise."

She even met some of the people she conversed with online in real life at some of the church's protests. When she met one Twitter friend, David, at a protest where she was holding a sign that read "God hates Jews," and 6

the two of them exchanged gifts, the beliefs with which she was raised began to break down. Phelps-Roper left the church in 2012.

As Megan tells her story, she stresses that what she learned about listening to others who are different and trying to understand them rather than viewing them as the enemy is extremely important for today's culture and political climate. "The path we have chosen (as a nation) looks so like the one I walked away from four years ago," she said.

Words can destroy, tear down, or words can build up.

The tongue is a small part of the body, but can speak blessing or curse.

How do you complete the lyrics to this song,

They'll know we are Christians by our.....