

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Words Have Power

Scripture James 3:1-12

September 12th, 2021

Last week we looked at the theme of distinguishing between God's work to build the Kingdom of God from our work. We looked at the second chapter of the Letter of James. This week we look to the power words hold and look how James understands his speech influences others. James realizes one of Jesus' greatest strengths was how Jesus understood using his power for good. As we have talked about before, Jesus uses relational power by building through relationships with other people and the power of the common people by uniting them under the idea of building the Kingdom of God here and now instead of waiting for power to be held or gradually using your power for good in an incremental manner. Jesus understood people in powerful positions would always look out for their best interests unless the people, united under one common cause, could use their power together to create change. The question we wrestle with this morning is how do we use power for good and specifically, how do our speech and our words hold power? Let us first look to the power of words by the power of poetry and literature. This is a Robert Frost poem entitled, "*The Gift Outright.*"

"The land was ours before we were the land's.

She was our land more than a hundred years before we were her people.

She was ours in Massachusetts, in Virginia,

But we were England's, still colonials,

Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,

Possessed by what we now no more possessed.

Something we were withholding made us weak

Until we found it was ourselves

We were withholding from our land of living,

And forthwith found salvation in surrender.

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright

(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)

To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.”

Some folks spend a lifetime studying words. Words are like are our bodies and our minds, they need to be practiced, one must be disciplined in learning new words and their uses, and words require understand contextual meanings and putting to good use proper critical thinking methods, but most importantly, words are used to express ourselves and interpret what we are experiencing. Poetry is powerful. This quote from Plato expresses the power, strength, and beauty of words. *“Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back. Those who wish to sing always find a song. At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet.”* Words are used to inspire and motivate for good, evil, and everything in between. Let us examine the power of words by learning a little bit about words and how they are constructed.

In looking at how words are constructed, specifically in poetry, Helen Vendler, a literary critic and professor at Harvard, asks us to look at words in poetry and literature as broken up into a few distinct categories. Those categories are sound units, word roots, the word itself, and sentence structure. Sound units are the most basic way of words as it influences how we hear the words, thus influencing our connection and relationship to those words. It may be as simple as all of us learning how to pronounce the word, enemy, *en-eh-mee*, three syllables with a distinct rhythm and form to their structure. Vendler says this, “Poets ‘bind’ words together in a line by having them share sounds, whether consonants or vowels. This makes the words sound as if they ‘belong’ together by natural affinity” (Vendler 145). Words have power by sharing a rhythm and binding a connection together through mutual understanding.

Word roots are important because they can give you a hint and context to what a person is saying even if they say it in away that may be confusing or muddled together. We do this through the work of prefixes. For example, re- like in return, revolve, repair, represent, is a root word for again, just as the prefix pre-, which means in front of, precede, prefer, preclude. Root words give a deeper context to words instead of simply taking them at face value. Have you ever been in a heated conversation with someone when one of you asks, “Tell me what you really want to say, or tell me how you really feel?” Root words help us see our language as a complex series of relationships binded together to express oneself just like we do in our lives as we tell our stories. A story about Mom or Dad or a best friend we have known for years is never a simple stories, but it is a combination of all the other past stories and events that give those stories a deeper meaning and broader context.

The third concept of helping understand words are the definitions of the words themselves. Think of it this way, if I began talking about steamboats, then the word, steamboat, paints a specific picture in your mind. Pause for a moment and think of a steamboat. What does it look like, sound like, feel like? Now if I began telling you steamboats are powered by coal and are placed on large steel tracks placed down by laborers who have toiled across the land placing down the track so the steamboat can go across land and they are operated by a train conductor, you may think I've lost my mind! Of course I am describing a train and its most basic functions, but we understand certain words to be connected with other words. Steel may be how both boats and trains are constructed, but the obviously both of different functions even though they may be constructed out of the same material. There are four categories in which words can be understood, thematic, phonemic, grammatical relation, and syntactic relation. Words and the relationships words have with one another help us understand not only how words are expressed but how they are built. Words have power and how we use them is how we use our power.

Lastly, words use sentence structure to help us understand poetry and expression. In all my papers in my religion courses, the most common note in the margins I received was, subject-verb agreement connect the words! My professor, Dr. Kellogg, always wrote in the same red pen, in the same red writing, with the same red message that I always chose to ignore because my papers were almost always written the night before, so my editing, if there was any at all without a basic glance to ensure I didn't sound like an idiot, my editing was pretty nonexistent. Dr. Kellogg understood an important lesson, if you learn use words to properly communicate your message, then people will respond in more meaningful, impactful ways than you simply telling them the correct things to believe.

I could stand here every Sunday and communicate to everyone each Sunday how terrible each of you were this week and talk about all the problems in the world and how truly awful these problems are and how we should all just give up. Firstly, I would not want to go to a church every week that gave this message every Sunday, but how would that affect you? Would you leave here in a cheery, optimistic mood ready to tackle your week? No, you would probably leave here angry and fearful of the world around you waiting for whatever demon or derelict to pop out at the next corner. Our words have power to convey deeper meanings and influence others in profound ways. Let's use words to build each other up, not tear each other down. Let's turn to the Letter to James as we continue to reflect on the power of words.

Taming the Tongue

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. **2** 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. **3** If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. **4** 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. **5** 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! **6** 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. **7** For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, **8** but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. **10** From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. **11** Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? **12** Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine yield fresh? No more can saltwater yield fresh.” (NRSV).

James is calling out those who use their speech to tear others down or make them feel less than because of who they are. James reminds teachers that they possess an immense amount of power in communities because they have the responsibility to use their teachings to influence others. Remember the words of Uncle Ben from the Marvel superhero series, Spiderman, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Leaders, especially those who teachers, have a deep influence on the minds of all of us as teachers are sometimes our first and only source of the information we will now tell the rest of the world. Thank you to all the responsible teachers doing their best to influence their students in a positive way.

James uses a metaphor about bits for horses and small rudders for large ships as examples of how our tongues should be bridled and disciplined when we speak, and in verse five, James makes a great point that the tongue is a small member of the body, however, our tongue is one of the most boastful, expressive aspects of the body as well. In other words, be cautious with what you say and how you say it, because, “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!” (James 3:5b). Verse 6 is a little confusing, but what I think James is trying to say here is our tongue has a unique ability in being able to simultaneously inspire new movements and destroy entire empires all at the same time. Think of how the different contexts of the words that inspired the French Revolution. To her wealthy, affluent friends, Marie Antoinette’s words meant something entirely different when she said, “Let them eat cake,” than when the poor workers heard those words who didn’t even have enough money

for bread to eat. Our words, how we use them and the context in which they come from, are powerful weapons in which we can use for building others up or breaking them down.

James concludes his message of powerful words by ending with some common analogies used in Jewish communities. He references the stories of creation with trees being a main focal point and the tradition of blessings and curses in Judaism. The tree James is referencing is the fig tree, which was a common parable used by Jesus. The fig tree only grows when it has water to nourish its roots to grow strong and tall. Our words can help others grow like a tree if we but use them to build others up and serve others. It was a common ethical practice in Judaism to try and do good for others as we should treat others with respect. Blessings and curses are used throughout a large portion of the Hebrew Bible. Think of the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land, etc. Our life journey is filled with blessings and curses, but what we do with those blessings and curses is up to us. Do we build each other up or do we tear each other down? We all certainly do both all the time. It is not a competition to see who can use their tongue to do be the best or recite the fanciest words or speeches, but it is learning how to treat others and expressing mutual respect for all of God's creation.

As we conclude today's message on this day we call, Rally Days, let us be moved by the Spirit of God to treat each other with mutual respect and admiration. We do not have to like everything about one another or be best friends with everyone we meet, but I think we can acknowledge the goodness in one another and the Divine in each other that binds us all together in our relationship to Christ and all Creation. In lieu of this understanding, I have a personal challenge for you. I challenge each of you to call, text, email, or say face-to-face three people this week and tell them, "You have been good to me. Thank you for your kindness and compassion. May God bless you goodness and I see God's goodness in you." Three people. If you can do that, then I think we can reach over a hundred people this week by letting them know how much they have meant to us. Spread more goodness in the world, friends. Be cautious this week on how you use words in your daily speech, your social media posts, and your professional/personal relationships. Let us build the Kingdom of God by building up one another through kindness, grace, mercy, and compassion, Amen.