

Trinity United Methodist Church

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“Lessons from Kindergarten:

Sticks and Stones: Words DO HURT!”

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Scripture: James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

I read about a 5-year-old who came home from school one day. Their mom was teleworking and was on a work call, and so she hit “mute” to ask the child how their day

had been at school, and the child replied, “Shh. Go back to work. I have a list of things that I want you to buy with the money that you’re making.”

A friend shared the other day that they told their kids to stop saying “shut up” because it sounds mean and can hurt people’s feelings. And so the kids evidently got creative. The next day when the 9-year-old kept talking and talking and talking and talking and talking, the 6-year-old couldn’t handle it any more and said, “Silence, you peasant!”

And I read about a father and son playing catch. The father said he had a terrible throw that sailed over the son’s head. And so he said, “sorry, that was a bad throw.” The son stopped, gave his dad a very kind look, and said, “No, daddy. That was a wonderful throw.” He took two steps toward the ball and then turned back to his dad and said, “Now, if we say something nice, even when we didn’t really mean it, that’s being polite, right?”

Some of you might remember the show, *Kids Say The Darndest Things*. Indeed they do. But we’re in this series called Back To School: Lessons from Kindergarten. Things that we learn early on in life that help us in life, but we can apply to our faith as well, especially really talking about the basics. And kindergarten is, unfortunately, one of those first places in life where we realize and we find out how mean this world can be. Particularly people in this world around us, through actions like bullying and especially what kids say to each other. I’m sure you can remember, like me, all the names that you got called in elementary school and more, and maybe you called somebody else.

And so the old phrase is, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Right? And so we say that. We might teach our kids that to try to buck them up a little bit, but we know that absolutely words **can** hurt. And not just in elementary school or school in general, but into adulthood also. Sadly, some of the most hurtful things that have been said to people have been said by or on behalf of Christianity and the church. Maybe not directly to us, but maybe about us. Sometimes these are brought up as “prayer concerns.” We need to pray for so-and-so because... Or, I once knew of a fine, upstanding church woman who prefaced everything she would come at you with, “Let me tell you something *in love*.” And then she would proceed to rip you a new one, or whatever the case might be.

It’s often also not just the words that we actually speak, but it’s the way that we say it that can be just as hurtful, if not more. Words that we speak and how we say them, though, typically reveal more about ourselves than they do about the person of whom or two whom we are speaking.

James talks about this today, talking about how our tongues are, thankfully, not as big as a blue whale’s tongue, but our tongues are actually one of the smallest parts of

the body but control so much of us. And he says “with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

So then, good golly, what are we to do? I love what James says at the ending of this passage. He asks, “can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” So we might ask ourselves to start out: How’s our spring? How are we deep inside? Going back to that old John Wesley question, how is it with our soul? How are we doing, really? Talking about springs, Psalm 1 says, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on His law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers.”

Where are your roots? Are they planted by streams of living water of Jesus, or are they drying out in the drought?

I’m seeing burn bans go up across the Southeast as we are in drought conditions. We need rain and there is none in sight, while other parts of the country get flooded. That’s one of the questions I want to ask God when I get there. “What’s up with that? Why do some people get more than they need and others not? But I digress.

James talks about how just one small spark can start an entire forest fire. And if our own well is running dry, then there is no way that we can give positively and meaningfully to others. We’ve run out of what we can give positively and meaningfully to others.

Which leads to the next point, that controlling our tongue is not only about making sure that we’re not talking badly. But controlling our tongue is also about making sure that we’re speaking well, that we’re speaking in a way that builds others up. And again, this is more than simply saying nice things about others. Because remember, what we say about others is less about them and more about ourselves. And as we learned in the opening illustrations, out of niceness we can say something and not mean a bit of it.

So how do we do that? We have to plant our roots by the stream. We have to fill our well with the Living Water. I was reminded this morning, oh yeah, we’ve got that scripture up there on the wall for a reason, right? The Rivers of Life, the theme behind this whole service.

When Jesus was led into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil, He didn't argue with the devil out of his intellect. He didn't come back with smart quips and wisecracks back at Satan or anything. He answered Satan with Scripture every single time he was tempted. And we can follow that pattern as well. I've known people, and preachers in particular, that almost every other phrase out of their mouths is something out of Scripture, to the point it can almost be a little annoying, right? You know, just talk normal sometimes, maybe we might think. But the Word of God lives so deeply inside them that it just comes out left and right. In John Wesley's writings, it's Scripture this and Scripture that throughout. One of my professors, the preaching professor I've had, his name is Dave Ward. And Dave and I are wired so similarly that it's like I can read his mind. And so when someone said something in class one time that all of us were in disbelief, I could tell what Dave wanted to say back to this guy. But instead he quoted Scripture in a way that built that person up instead of tearing that person down.

So, in other words, to fill our well, to make sure that we're speaking well and that we're controlling our tongues in a way that honors God, we have to stay in the Word. We have to read God's Word. Are you noticing a theme in my preaching? I keep coming back to this, right? And I'm reminding myself of this as well. Part of it is, we have to memorize the Bible. In my first appointment, I ran into a guy from church out and about in town, and he said, "Pastor, I just saw this show about Muslims. And did you know that they make their kindergarteners memorize the whole Quran? How horrible is that?" I said, "I don't think that's all that horrible. What if we had our kindergarteners memorize more of the Bible?" What if we memorized more of the Bible? You might say, "I don't have time to do that," or "I don't have brain capacity to do that." Well, let me ask you: How many movie lines can you quote by memory? "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." "Luke, at that speed will we be able to pull out in time?" How many song lyrics do you know from memory? How many sports statistics? How many sound bites off the news do we just readily repeat without even thinking? And, Lord knows, how much useless trivia do we have rolling around up there in our heads? Maybe your mom was like mine: "I wish you could remember your studies that way."

Well, if it's true that our checkbooks can tell us where our treasure really lies and where our hearts really are, and if it's true that our calendars can tell us the same thing—what's important to us is what gets scheduled—then how much more so the words that come out of our mouths and how we say them can tell us how we're doing spiritually.

I found a great article on Mindfuel.com that gives a very practical framework for helping us think through how we might control and shape what we say. And maybe you've heard it before. Of course it begins with the old adage to think before you speak.

And as you think about what you're about to say, to ask these three questions. Maybe you've heard them before:

- Is it true?
- Is it kind?
- Is it necessary?

Is it true, is it necessary, and it is kind. When we ask, "is what I'm about to say *true*," first of all, do we really know *for sure*, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it's true? Or is it just something that we heard from somebody else? And if it's not, and there's any kind of a doubt about whether it might or might not be true, why am I saying it? What am I really trying to communicate by stretching the truth?

Then we ask, is it *necessary*? It might very well be *true*, but is it *necessary* to say it? There are many times when what we want to say isn't necessary or helpful for the situation at hand. Or it might be necessary, but not for the given time, place, or audience.

And then thirdly, is it *kind*? When we say things, are we showing empathy? Are we taking into account the feelings of others? Are we saying something that will lift the mood or lift the spirits of those in the room? Expressing kindness is not about mindless optimism or giving gratuitous compliments. It's about knowing which words are the most compassionate to use and to say them in the most compassionate way.

I would say that all that we say and do as followers of Christ should be done through the lens of love. Of *holy* love. It doesn't mean that we can't say hard things that need to be said. But it means that even the hard things that need to be said from time to time should be done in love. And maybe our framework can be that out of 1 Corinthians 13:

- Love is patient. Do we say things patiently?
- Love is kind.
- Love does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud.
- Love does not dishonor others.
- It is not self-seeking.
- It is not easily angered.
- It keeps no record of wrongs.
- Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth.

- Love always protects, always trusts. I would say it gives the benefit of the doubt.
- Love always hopes and always perseveres.

May God forgive us for the words that we have said and not said, and may the grace of Jesus Christ overflow from us as we forgive ourselves and others for what we have said and not said. And always, may the Holy Spirit be the rudder in our lives, the bit in our mouths, so that all that we say and all that we do is guided by love. Thanks be to God. Amen.