James 3:1-12

What the parrot says

September 16, 2019 The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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When the boy sits down to talk with his grandmother, she can tell he is troubled. Every since his grandpa died, he’s been coming over to visit her. His mom does her errands and stays in house a while just so the two can visit awhile alone awhile. Of course, it’s the highlight of every day.

This evening something is different. *What’s the matter honey?* She says. He sniffs into the silence. His feet don’t touch the ground; his dangling legs are moving the swing more quickly now. *You want to talk about it*? She says. He sniffs again.

***He called me stupid. I’m not stupid. I just don’t understand everything the way the teacher does. That doesn’t make me stupid. But he thinks it does.***

*Who*? **The kid in my class. He’s always saying mean stuff to me. I don’t like it.**

*Well I wouldn’t like it either. Never did, never will.*

**Just because he knows what I don’t know, doesn’t mean I’m stupid. That’s what he called me – in front of everyone. Then he made all these goofy faces at me. I wanted to hit him, it hurt so bad.**

Well, did you hit him? **No!** I would have. **No you wouldn’t, I know you wouldn’t do it!**  She laughs. *You’re right. But sometimes it feels like the right thing*. **Yea.**

*What would happen if you hit him?* He looks at her, puzzled.

**I don’t know. *Nothing good. Wouldn’t change him a bit. I know that much.***

***Now, I just bite my tongue and walk away.***

***He doesn’t make me who I am. But it hurts, still. He does it to everyone.***

*Sounds like a little bully, to me, too big for his britches.* **What are britches?** Oh it’s just a old saying – when someone doesn’t know how to control themself, let their tongues run wild over others. **That’s him!**

**He says things that are mean; that hurt people, like he wants to hurt people to make himself feel big, or something like that. My friend likes to dance and he calls him a sissy. Once he said this other kid was a loser, just because he didn’t score a run. He says that kind of stuff all the time. Worse stuff too that I’m not gonna say to you. Girls don’t like him.**

When I was growing up, she says, people said words can’t hurt you. Sticks and stones can, but not words. You believe that? Well, I didn’t then and I don’t now. Because I know it was never true. Words can always hurt people. Hard. They can make you feel good too. But you have to choose your words. That’s what your grandpa would tell you if he were here. Well, I guess in a way he his. **Really?** Yea, in our memory, he is right here. I know it. Anyway, grandpa would quote his favorite book of the Bible, James. Words will start a fire, quicker than a match, he would say. **I remember his saying: tame your tongue, son. But I didn’t know what that meant; like taming a tiger or something. Still I got his point.**

*Well, that’s why biting your tongue is better than saying mean things. That’s taming it, too. You get to be the captain, like steering your own soul, like a boat.*

*You feel better?* **Yea.** Let’s go see your mom.

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Billy Graham, not well known for funny sayings, once said, “*A true Christian is one who can give his pet parrot to the town gossip*.”

What is it about words that make them so powerful – for good or for ill – and therefore so perilous? James piles up metaphors describing the awesome effects of the tongue: it will burn down a forest, turn a ship liner, pollute a river, stain a body and wreck a community. It would be easy to say James gets a bit carried away here, unless of course you are feeling the effects of ill spoken words. Then you hear this cautionary tale differently. You have to wonder if James had a particular teacher in mind when he wrote his scathing critique directed particularly at teachers. But, of course, all of us are implicated in his critic, including pastors and public leaders.

***Never in my lifetime has the public speech at the highest level been so vulgar and utterly devoid of wisdom and grace. You know what I’m talking about. The result is a toxic climate of public discourse, the very thing that James warned against.***

James is so mindful of the delirious effects of the tongue that it’s wonder he didn’t urge upon his readers a vow of silence, like Benedict urged upon his fellow monks. But presuming we are not going to take a vow of silence, the pressing question is how shall we speak wisely, knowing that words can build a house of love in a lifetime or demolish it down in an instant.

My favorite Hasidic story bears repeating. “A woman was disturbed that her gossip against others had caused serious damage. She asked her Rabbi what she could do to make amends. The Rabbi says to the woman: take a feather and place it on the doorstep of every person who has been hurt by your words. Then go to sleep and return to me. She did as she was instructed and returned to the Rabbi. The Rabbi said now return to each of the homes to pick up the feather and bring them back to me. The woman returned empty handed, ‘all the feathers were blown away’. The Rabbi replied, ***so it is with your words, once they have been spoken they can never be returned.”***

Imagine a community where the pet parrot can be given to the town gossip.

And go ahead, imagine a congregation of Jesus’ followers where the pet parrot can be given to the town gossip.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.