

The Power of Speech
James 3:1-10
Rev. Lynne Spencer-Smith

In preparation for today's sermon, I ran across one commentary suggested that, after encountering this text from James a preacher might have the sudden urge to simply engage in a time of silent prayer in lieu of a sermon....¹

We shall take some time in silence but, alas, not in lieu of the sermon... in addition to.

Please be with me in silence.

Silence is difficult for us, O God. You have given us the gifts of speech and voice and language and intellect but we don't always manage to put them together very well. But, in your wisdom, you also give us the gift of listening. Not just hearing but listening deeply. May these moments, the words spoken in them and the message that makes it through to our hearts be that which you would need us to hear and understand. Amen.

A US News and World Report study revealed that 90% of all Americans felt that the loss of civility is a serious problem in our country. According to the survey, we are no longer civil to each other, we treat each other rudely and show very little respect for one another. The survey also revealed that, although 90% of the population recognizes there is a serious problem with our nation's civility, 99% of Americans say that they themselves are civil. In other words, almost everyone agrees that people in this country are too rude and mean but only one person in every hundred is willing to admit that they are the culprit. Only 1% is willing to be honest and admit that they have the power to do something about it.²

By the way, the survey was taken in 1996. Sixteen years ago. In sixteen years, I can't say we've improved much and in the heat of what seems like the most contentious political season in our nation's history, the incivility is *not* limited to the candidates. If what shows up on my computer screen is any indication, I would guess that rarely a day goes by that there are not millions of inflammatory and hurtful comments uttered via email, Facebook, letters to editors, radio call-in shows, not to mention bumper stickers, and cable and network television. Just because the words are not being spoken from our mouths directly to another person, incivility is still incivility and it has crept its way into every aspect of our lives.

There is one word for it: Toxic. It's a poison that seeps slowly into our environment and is eating away at the foundation of our culture.

Could it be that the developers of the lectionary knew that this text from James would roll around somewhere around seven weeks before election day in the United States? I really don't think that they had that in mind at all but, it does seem to be rather timely. As the campaigns have gathered steam and continue to do so, candidates and supporters seem to be forgetting that we are considered part of the "civilized world," and a nation founded on "Christian principles." If the stuff that has been landing in my in box, coming across on Facebook, and showing up in any number of places and in any number of formats are examples of either civilization or Christianity, stop the bus now because I want to get off. None of it is admirable, complimentary or helpful.

What happened to the thing our mothers used to tell us... “if you can’t say anything nice, ... finish it don’t say anything at all.

As much as I’d like to blame the internet and social media, attempts to “bridle our tongues” are nothing new under the sun. These verses from the Book of James aren’t all that much... just 12 verses. But when you look at the whole book, there’s only five chapters. Twelve verses full of admonitions about taming the tongue is a lot of ink in five little chapters. James was written almost 2000 years ago. Apparently, civil speech has been a challenge for quite some time. Which simply means it’s one of those things we will always, always have to be working on. It’s a muscle we’ll have to train and use. It’s a skill that needs practice.... Like playing the piano or tennis, or singing, or prayer. The more you practice, the better at it you become. If you practice incivility, you become good at it. If you practice civility, exercise speaking graciously, complimentary, even speaking the hard truth with love, that is what you will become good at. The more we practice civil speech, the better we get at it and the more natural it becomes.

We may think that our speech is powerless, after all, remember the playground retort to insults... Sticks and stones can break my bones but... (finish it), words can never hurt me. Say that to the teen who is barraged daily in the halls at school. Say that to the colleague at work who just always seems to be a half a step off and overhears the comments coming over the wall of the cubicle. Say that to the woman who is beaten up with words on a regular basis. Say that to the family who grieves the suicide of someone who just couldn’t live with the those words that supposedly can’t hurt. Our words are powerful and the way we use them is just as much about how we live out our Christian vocation as praying, going on mission trips and tithing.

How we use our words is perhaps one of the most important choices we can make about our behavior. What comes out of our mouths, exported out of our out box or posted on our Facebook ultimately is not about that which we are expressing an opinion. What comes out of our thoughts and ends up being expressed in whatever form is ultimately a reflection on ourselves. Jesus reminded the religious leaders of his day that the mouth speaks that which is the abundance of the heart. (Matthew 12:34-37). Matthew tells us that Jesus said, “The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”³

Sticks and stones may very well break bones, but words can shatter the heart and soul, they can destroy lives. The rotten words can seep into the soul and poison the life right out of it.

So, I invite you to join me in the practice of faithful speaking where words are used to build people up, not tear them down; where speech, either spoken or written, hard-copy or electronic, reflects the goodness that God has given each of us; where the first words that come forth from us are words of praise and gratitude and where words that are issued as criticism are offered in compassion and mercy. Let us be the 1% who are committed to doing something to make a very important difference in the world today.

Amen.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/16/2012, Sandra Hack Polaski

² As referenced in *Charting the Course*, by Mark A. Powell, Sunday, Proper 19; referring to The US News and World Report, The American Uncivil Wars: **How crude, rude and obnoxious behavior has replaced good manners and why that hurts our politics and culture**
By John Marks Posted 4/14/96

³ <http://Jounerywithjesus.net/Essays/20090907JJ.shtml>