

James 3:1-12

September 16, '18

“VERBAL STICKS & STONES”

**OUR SCRIPTURE THIS MORNING IS AGAIN FOUND
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOK OF JAMES.**

**I WANT TO TAKE YOU BACK TO LAST WEEK & RE-
CAP A FEW THINGS WE SAID ABOUT THIS BOOK
BECAUSE I THINK THOSE THINGS ARE RELEVANT
AGAIN TODAY.**

**AMONG THE VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES THAT EXIST
REGARDING THE AUTHORSHIP OF JAMES, I THINK
THE EVIDENCE POINTS MOST CLEARLY TO THE
JAMES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WHO WAS THE
BROTHER OF JESUS.**

**HE WAS ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL
LEADERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH & WHILE THIS
BOOK IS CATEGORIZED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AS**

***“THE LETTER OF JAMES,”* I THINK IT MORE PROPERLY FITS INTO THE CATEGORY OF A SERMON.**

I SUGGESTED LAST WEEK THAT IT SEEMED AS IF JAMES WAS OBSERVING THINGS THAT WERE TAKING PLACE IN THE CHURCH & ADDRESSED THOSE AREAS OF CONCERN IN A SERMON IN WORSHIP.

LAST WEEK, IT WAS SHOWING PARTIALITY TOWARD CERTAIN PEOPLE & NEGLECTING OTHERS.

JAMES WAS RATHER POINTED IN HIS CRITICISM OF SUCH BEHAVIOR WITHIN THE CHURCH & THERE WERE OTHER ISSUES THAT CONCERNED HIM AS WELL.

HE FOLLOWED UP THE CONCERN OVER PARTIALITY WITH A CONCERN ABOUT THE WAY PEOPLE SPEAK TO & ABOUT OTHERS.

HE BEGINS BY POINTING HIS REMARKS TOWARD THOSE HE LABELS “TEACHERS,” BUT I THINK HE MEANS THAT IN A BROADER SENSE THAN HOW WE ORDINARILY DO.

HE’S INCLUDING HIMSELF IN THAT CATEGORY & WHAT HE MEANS IS ANYONE WHO HOLDS ANY LEVEL OF AUTHORITY.

HE MEANS THOSE WITHIN THE CHURCH WHO ARE LEADERS, THOSE WITH POSITIONS OF POWER IN THE COMMUNITY, THOSE WHO HAVE AUTHORITY IN GOVERNMENT OR BUSINESS.

HERE’S HOW THE REVISED STANDARD VERSION OF THE BIBLE DELIVERS THESE WORDS OF JAMES IN THE FIRST 12 VERSES OF THE THIRD CHAPTER:

“LET NOT MANY OF YOU BECOME TEACHERS, MY BRETHREN, FOR YOU KNOW THAT WE WHO TEACH

SHALL BE JUDGED WITH GREATER STRICTNESS. FOR WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES AND IF ANYONE MAKES NO MISTAKES IN WHAT HE SAYS, HE IS A PERFECT MAN, ABLE TO BRIDLE THE WHOLE BODY ALSO.

IF WE PUT BITS INTO THE MOUTHS OF HORSES THAT THEY MAY OBEY US, WE GUIDE THEIR WHOLE BODIES. LOOK AT THE SHIPS ALSO; THOUGH THEY ARE SO GREAT AND ARE DRIVEN BY STRONG WINDS, THEY ARE GUIDED BY A VERY SMALL RUDDER WHEREVER THE WILL OF THE PILOT DIRECTS.

SO THE TONGUE IS A LITTLE MEMBER AND BOASTS OF GREAT THINGS. HOW GREAT A FOREST HAS BEEN SET ABLAZE BY A SMALL FIRE!

AND THE TONGUE IS A FIRE. THE TONGUE IS AN UNRIGHTEOUS WORLD AMONG OUR MEMBERS,

***STAINING THE WHOLE BODY, SETTING ON FIRE THE
CYCLE OF NATURE, AND SET ON FIRE BY HELL.***

***FOR EVERY KIND OF BEAST AND BIRD, OF REPTILE
AND SEA CREATURE, CAN BE TAMED AND HAS BEEN
TAMED BY HUMANKIND, BUT NO HUMAN BEING CAN
TAME THE TONGUE – A RESTLESS EVIL FULL OF
DEADLY POISON.***

***WITH IT WE BLESS THE LORD AND FATHER, AND
WITH IT WE CURSE MEN WHO ARE MADE IN THE
LIKENESS OF GOD. FROM THE SAME MOUTH COME
BLESSING AND CURSING.***

***MY BRETHREN, THIS OUGHT NOT TO BE SO. DOES A
SPRING POUR FORTH FROM THE SAME OPENING FRESH
WATER AND BRACKISH? CAN A FIG TREE, MY
BRETHREN, YIELD OLIVES, OR A GRAPEVINE FIGS? NO
MORE CAN SALT WATER YIELD FRESH.”***

JUST AS WE DISCOVERED LAST WEEK, THESE WORDS ARE HARSH & STRAIGHTFORWARD.

THEY ARE WORDS THAT SPEAK – NOT JUST TO THE PEOPLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE *FIRST* CENTURY – BUT THE *TWENTY*-FIRST CENTURY AS WELL.

I THINK THAT’S PART OF THE APPEAL OF JAMES.

WE CAN CLEARLY UNDERSTAND & RELATE TO HIS WORDS.

I THINK THAT HAS ALSO BEEN PART OF THE REASON THIS BOOK HAS BEEN LOOKED UPON NEGATIVELY AS WELL.

LAST WEEK, WE TALKED ABOUT THE FACT THAT MARTIN LUTHER WANTED TO HAVE IT TAKEN OUT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ENTIRELY, CALLING IT “*AN EPISTLE OF STRAW.*”

THE GENERAL CONCLUSION HAS ALWAYS BEEN THAT LUTHER'S PROBLEM WITH JAMES WAS THAT IT SEEMED TO CONTRADICT PAUL'S "SAVED BY GRACE ALONE" THEOLOGY.

AS WE DISCUSSED LAST WEEK, IT DOESN'T.

BUT I WONDER IF AN EVEN STRONGER REASON FOR LUTHER'S DISPLEASURE WITH JAMES IS THAT HE FOUND IT HITTING TOO CLOSE TO HOME FOR HIM PERSONALLY.

THESE ARE SOME PRETTY STRONG WORDS ABOUT THE EVILS OF THE TONGUE.

MARTIN LUTHER COULD HURL INSULTS WITH THE BEST (OR WORST) OF HIS TIME.

CONSIDER THESE WORDS OF LUTHER WHEN TALKING ABOUT HIS OPPONENTS.

HE SAID TO ONE, “*YOU ARE THE SCUM OF ALL THE SCOUNDRELS. YOU ARE AN ABOMINABLE ARCH-HERETIC.*”

TO ANOTHER GROUP OF OPPONENTS, HE SAID, “*YOU SHAMEFUL GLUTTONS AND SERVANTS OF YOUR BELLIES ARE BETTER SUITED TO BE SWINEHERDS AND KEEPERS OF DOGS.*”

AND TO ANOTHER GROUP, LUTHER SAID, “*YOU DESERVE NOT ONLY TO BE GIVEN NO FOOD TO EAT, BUT ALSO TO HAVE THE DOGS SET UPON YOU AND TO BE PELTED WITH HORSE MANURE! OH, WHAT MAD, SENSELESS FOOLS YOU ARE!*”

YES, I THINK IT’S PRETTY CLEAR THAT THE WORDS OF JAMES HIT HOME FOR MARTIN LUTHER!

AND THOUGH WE MAY NOT OPENLY SUGGEST THAT ANYONE BE “*PELTED WITH HORSE MANURE,*” I’M

PRETTY SURE THESE WORDS HIT HOME FOR US AS WELL.

THE WORDS WE SPEAK MATTER.

THESE AREN'T THE ONLY VERSES IN JAMES THAT ADDRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR WORDS AND OUR SPEECH.

IN THE VERY FIRST CHAPTER, HE CHALLENGES HIS LISTENERS & READERS TO “*BE QUICK TO HEAR AND SLOW TO SPEAK.*”

IN FACT, TO SHOW HOW IMPORTANT THIS ISSUE IS TO JAMES, OF THE 108 VERSES IN THIS ENTIRE BOOK, 46 OF THEM DEAL, IN SOME WAY, WITH MATTERS OF SPEECH!

THIS IS CLEARLY A VERY IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR JAMES IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH!

IN THE BIBLE, IT ISN'T JUST IN JAMES THAT WE HEAR OF THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR SPEECH.

JAMES HAS BEEN LIKENED TO THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK OF PROVERBS.

ONE OF THE REASONS IS BECAUSE OF THE FREQUENCY WITH WHICH WE HEAR SIMILAR WORDS IN THAT BOOK.

WE READ IN PROVERBS THAT *“THE WORDS OF THE RECKLESS PIERCE LIKE SWORDS, BUT THE TONGUE OF THE WISE BRINGS HEALING.”*

WE HEAR, *“THOSE WHO GUARD THEIR LIPS PRESERVE THEIR LIVES, BUT THOSE WHO SPEAK RASHLY WILL COME TO RUIN.”*

AND, *“THE HEART OF THE RIGHTEOUS WEIGHS ITS ANSWERS, BUT THE MOUTH OF THE WICKED GUSHES EVIL.”*

WHEN WE HEAR SUCH WORDS AS THESE, OUR IMMEDIATE THOUGHT IS, “*WELL, I WISH SO-AND-SO WOULD LISTEN TO & ABIDE BY THAT!*”

AND GUESS WHAT?

SO-AND-SO MAY BE WISHING *YOU* WOULD ABIDE BY THAT!

WE’RE ALL GUILTY OF INAPPROPRIATE SPEECH, AREN’T WE?

THAT’S WHY IT’S SPOKEN OF SO OFTEN IN SCRIPTURE.

PAUL, WRITING TO THE EPHESIANS, SAID, “*SPEAK ONLY WHAT IS USEFUL FOR BUILDING UP, AS THERE IS NEED, SO THAT YOUR WORDS MAY GIVE GRACE TO THOSE WHO HEAR.*”

AND JESUS HIMSELF SAID, “*...EVERYONE WILL HAVE TO GIVE ACCOUNT ON THE DAY OF JUDGMENT*”

FOR EVERY EMPTY WORD THEY HAVE SPOKEN. FOR BY YOUR WORDS YOU WILL BE ACQUITTED, AND BY YOUR WORDS YOU WILL BE CONDEMNED.”

IN FACT, WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT – THE ENTIRE BIBLE BEGINS WITH THE IMPORTANCE OF WORDS.

IN THE VERY FIRST CHAPTER OF GENESIS – WE HEAR WORDS ABOUT WORDS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO US EVERY SINGLE DAY IN EVERYTHING WE SEE ALL AROUND US.

IN THE STORY OF CREATION, EVERYTHING THAT IS CAME INTO BEING BECAUSE OF A WORD SPOKEN BY GOD.

“GOD SAID, ‘LET THERE BE LIGHT’ AND THERE WAS LIGHT.”

“GOD SAID, ‘LET THERE BE A DOME IN THE MIDST OF THE WATERS’....AND IT WAS SO.”

“GOD SAID, ‘LET THE WATERS BRING FORTH SWARMS OF LIVING CREATURES’...AND THERE THEY WERE.”

“GOD SAID, ‘LET THE EARTH BRING FORTH LIVING CREATURES’...AND THERE THEY WERE.”

“GOD SAID, ‘LET US MAKE HUMANKIND IN OUR OWN IMAGE’...” AND HERE WE ARE!

LOOK AROUND YOU.

EVERYTHING WE SEE IN GOD’S CREATION CAME ABOUT BECAUSE OF A WORD FROM GOD!

WORDS MATTER!

THOUGH I’M SURE IT COULD PROBABLY BE SAID ABOUT ANY TIME IN HISTORY, CAN YOU THINK OF

**ANY PERIOD IN THE LIFETIME OF ANY ONE OF US
WHEN THIS WAS MORE TRUE THAN NOW?!**

**WE CERTAINLY HEAR THOSE IN POSITIONS OF
AUTHORITY USING WORDS THAT JAMES WOULD
HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT!**

**WE ALL REMEMBER HEARING THE SAYING,
“*STICKS & STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES, BUT WORDS
CAN NEVER HURT ME.*”**

IT ISN'T TRUE, IS IT?

**IN FACT, WORDS CAN LEAVE DEEPER SCARS THAN
A MIGHTY STICK OR A HEAVY STONE.**

WE ALL KNOW THIS TO BE TRUE, DON'T WE?

**YOU'VE HAD SOMETHING SAID TO YOU THAT HAS
LEFT A DEEP WOUND IN YOUR LIFE.**

**PERHAPS YOU HAVE SAID SOMETHING THAT HAS
LEFT A DEEP WOUND IN SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE.**

I REMEMBER AN EXPERIENCE I HAD AS A YOUNG PERSON IN THE HOSPITAL.

I SPENT A LOT OF TIME IN HOSPITALS WHEN I WAS A TEEN-AGER BUT THIS WAS A TIME LONG BEFORE THAT.

I WAS JUST SIX OR SEVEN YEARS OLD AND WAS IN THE HOSPITAL FOR ABOUT 5 DAYS.

I REMEMBER – AT THE TENDER AGE OF 6 OR 7 – TRYING TO BE DILIGENT IN NOT PRESSING THE “CALL” BUTTON FOR THE NURSE UNLESS I REALLY FELT I NEEDED TO.

I THOUGHT I WAS DOING A PRETTY GOOD JOB OF IT – BUT APPARENTLY I WASN’T.

THE ONLY MEMORY I HAVE OF THAT HOSPITAL STAY WAS WHEN I OVERHEARD A CONVERSATION IN THE HALL.

**ONE NURSE AT A SHIFT CHANGE SAID TO THE ONE
TAKING HER PLACE – “*THAT KID JUST KEEPS PRESSING
THE CALL BUTTON NON-STOP!*”**

**TO BE FAIR TO HER, I PROBABLY WAS BUT I
THOUGHT I WAS DOING SUCH A GOOD JOB OF NOT
BOTHERING THE NURSES.**

IT WAS DEVASTATING TO ME.

THAT WAS OBVIOUSLY A LOT OF YEARS AGO.

**TO BE HONEST, I CAN’T REALLY EVEN REMEMBER
WHAT I WAS THERE FOR ON THAT OCCASION.**

**WHATEVER IT WAS, THOUGH, COMPLETELY
HEALED A LONG TIME AGO.**

**THE HURT, THE INJURY, THE SURGERY, THE
AFFLICTION AREN’T EVEN A MEMORY FOR ME.**

**BUT THE WORDS OF THAT NURSE IN THE
HALLWAY STILL CREATE PAIN WHEN I THINK OF
THEM.**

OUR WORDS MATTER.

**BUT, YOU KNOW, I THINK WE CAN – IF WE CHOOSE
– LOOK AT THE WORDS OF JAMES IN THIS PASSAGE IN
A POSITIVE LIGHT – ESPECIALLY THE METAPHORS HE
USES.**

**HE TALKS ABOUT A BIT IN THE MOUTH OF A
HORSE, A RUDDER ON A SHIP & A FLAME THAT
STARTS A FIRE.**

**HIS POINT IS THAT ALL OF THESE ARE VERY
SMALL & YET THE DAMAGE THEY CAN INFLICT IS
ENORMOUS.**

**I THINK WE CAN USE THESE SAME METAPHORS
AND PROVE THE OPPOSITE.**

WHAT I MEAN IS THAT A BIT IN THE MOUTH OF A HORSE CAN GUIDE US IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, THE RUDDER ON A SHIP CAN SEND IT AWAY FROM A DEADLY STORM AND A TINY FLAME CAN BUILD A FIRE TO HEAT A HOME OR COOK A MEAL.

SO, TOO, WITH THE WORDS THAT CAN BE UTTERED BY THAT TINY MEMBER OF OUR BODY – THE TONGUE.

THINK OF THE COUNTLESS OPPORTUNITIES WE ARE PROVIDED EVERY SINGLE DAY TO OFFER A WORD OF HOPE, ENCOURAGEMENT OR AFFIRMATION TO ANOTHER PERSON.

EACH & EVERY ENCOUNTER WE HAVE WITH ANOTHER PERSON PRESENTS US WITH SUCH AN OPPORTUNITY.

I SUPPOSE THIS MAY NOT BE TRUE FOR EVERYONE, BUT IT SEEMS TO ME THAT, FOR MOST OF US, IT'S JUST A LOT MORE FUN TO MAKE POSITIVE STATEMENTS THAN NEGATIVE ONES.

THE FINEST EXAMPLE OF THIS THAT I'VE EVER SEEN IS SOMEONE I THINK MANY OF YOU KNOW.

JANE MICHELE MCCLURE IS ON THE STAFF OF HABITAT.

EVERYTHING THAT COMES OUT OF JANE MICHELE'S MOUTH IS POSITIVE AND HAPPY AND UPLIFTING AND, THEREFORE, JANE MICHELE HERSELF IS POSITIVE AND HAPPY AND UPLIFTING.

WHEN YOU TALK TO JANE MICHELE, YOU CAN'T LEAVE HER PRESENCE WITHOUT FEELING GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF.

**SHE MAKES YOU FEEL AS IF YOU'RE THE
GREATEST PERSON IN THE HISTORY OF THE
UNIVERSE.**

**AND HERE'S THE THING – YOU KNOW THAT JANE
MICHELE DOES THAT WITH EVERYONE – BUT IT
DOESN'T MATTER!**

**YOU SIMPLY CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL GOOD ABOUT
YOURSELF AND FEEL INSPIRED AND CHALLENGED TO
DO EVEN MORE THAN SHE SAYS YOU'VE ALREADY
DONE OR ARE CAPABLE OF DOING!**

**JANE MICHELE MCCLURE WOULD BE THE FIRST
TO SAY THAT SHE DOESN'T HAVE A LOT OF INHERENT
GIFTS THAT OTHERS MAY POSSESS AND YET WHAT
SHE DOES ENABLES THE GIFTS OF EVERYONE ELSE TO
BE USED TO THEIR FULL EXTENT.**

**YOU MIGHT LOOK AT A GREAT ATHLETE OR
MUSICIAN OR BUSINESS EXECUTIVE OR MEDICAL
PROFESSIONAL AND SAY, “*WOW! I WISH I COULD DO
WHAT THEY DO!*”**

**THE TRUTH IS – YOU MAY NOT HAVE THE
NATURAL ABILITIES TO ACCOMPLISH WHAT FOLKS IN
THOSE PARTICULAR AREAS CAN ACCOMPLISH.**

**BUT EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US HERE THIS
MORNING CAN DO WHAT JANE MICHELE MCCLURE
DOES.**

**WE ALL HAVE THAT TINY MEMBER OF THE BODY
KNOWN AS THE TONGUE.**

**WE ALL HAVE THE ABILITY TO USE IT FOR GOOD –
TO USE OUR WORDS TO BUILD UP & NEVER TEAR
DOWN; TO ENCOURAGE RATHER THAN DISCOURAGE;**

**TO BRING HOPE & HAPPINESS INSTEAD OF CRITICISM
& CONDESCENSION.**

**WE ALL CAN SPEAK WORDS THAT WILL BRING
GLORY TO GOD AND AFFIRMATION TO THOSE
AROUND US. AMEN.**

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*