

The Power of Words

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James 3:1-12

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Did you hear what happened to Bonnie Sue when she told her boss she wanted to quit? Well, from what I heard, he told her that she couldn't quit, because he fired her! Can you believe that? Bonnie was a really hard worker, and I think her boss must've been a total jerk.

And did you hear that they have decided that Michael Jackson's death now is a homicide? I'll bet it was that doctor of his who gave him all that pain medication....

What about you—have you heard any good “dirt” lately? What's the latest going around the water cooler at *your* office? You ever hear or engage in talk like that? There are not many people I know of that *never* gossip in one form or another. We are going to talk today about tongues and the power of our words.

Our lesson today comes from the Epistle of James, and we know from the last time I preached on James that his words to his audience—and to us—often times come right to the point, and touch a sometimes raw nerve.

James speaks to us today about our tongues and our speech.

The tongue is a very small part of our body, but in a sense, it is one of the most powerful organs we possess. He compares our tongues to bridles or bits in a horse's mouth. These bits are very small, yet are capable of steering a very large horse in a dead run.

Our tongues are like the small rudders used to steer giant ships. Rudders that are miniscule in comparison to the size of the overall ship can control grand ships on the oceans with just a touch of the hand to turn them. And, our tongues can make a huge impact on our lives and on the lives all around us.

There is a story about 2 court jesters. Their king told one of them to go out and find and bring to him the best thing in the whole world. He told the other jester to bring him the worst thing in the whole world. You can probably guess where this story ends . . . both jesters brought back to their king a tongue. Words can be used to cause great hurt and pain, *and* words can be used to heal and bring joy.

That old saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is a bunch of baloney in my book. We all have been hurt by words before—and I would assume to say we have all hurt another before with our wagging tongues.

So—my question to you today is: Is there such a thing as “good gossip?”

“Patricia Meyer Spacks, the author of the book *Gossip* contends that the talking about the personal lives of others need not be totally immoral. She says that gossip, at its best, is a means whereby we attempt to figure out who we are and how we ought to live. In other words, my talk about others is not always an attempt to build them up or tear them down but rather, to make sense out of myself” (William Willamon, *Christian Century*, Oct. 31, 1990).

Bottom line is, that our speech is a product of what is inside us, so before we speak, we would be wise to listen to our own inner voices and what they are saying to us. Will what I am about to say build up the Body of Christ and share God’s wisdom, or am I speaking to feed my own ambition or to gain favor with those I am sharing?

I have the perfect example of “good gossip.” It involves me, one our church members, and Jack Hunnicutt. As some of you know, several weeks ago I was going through some pretty difficult personal struggles. A dear church member came to my study one afternoon to see how I was doing. We shared with each other some, and I thought our conversation was over.

However, not more than 20 minutes later, I got a call from this congregation's former pastor, Jack Hunnicutt, who happened to be in town that day. He just said he would like to come by for a visit and to meet me. "O great, I thought to myself, I am in no mood to have to put on a face and meet this great legend of a pastor!" Well, Jack got here a few minutes later, and we chatted for a few minutes, then he just came out and said that he didn't just happen to drop by that afternoon, that the member who had visited me earlier stopped by to tell him that I could use a visit and some broad shoulders to share my burden.

Jack's visit to me was like God had sent an angel to hold my hand and tell me it was going to be all right. There is such a thing as "good gossip." Gossip is one of the ways people bond with each other.

One of the many origins of the word *gossip* is from the Old English word *godsip*—a contraction of the words God and siblings. "Gossip must've been the privileged conversation among the family, the siblings, probably about someone in the family who was absent. The abuse of that privilege was undoubtedly the beginnings of the negative connotations of gossip" (Ibid).

We here today are a family. We are all siblings, brothers and sisters in Christ by virtue of our baptism who pledge to share our stories

with each other, to help each other on our spiritual journey, or to just make us all better people.

In Baptism, we go public in a sense—offering our lives to our new family, opening ourselves to them, and taking responsibility for their lives as well.

William Willamon says that the gossip of a church family, “the talk of siblings by baptism, is sanctified—holy. Gossip, at its best, when done without malice, is a means of congregational bonding, a source of essential moral data about ourselves. Good gossip between siblings is an everyday means of investigating together what it means to be baptized—what it means to be individual members of the Body of Christ.

Admittedly, says Willamon, “the bonding and the information provided by gossip may be at the low end of the ladder of moral inquiry. But at least it is a beginning.”

You know that song, “There’s Power in the Blood?” Well I would like to content that there is power in the tongue. That little organ that each of us have in our mouths has the power to change lives. None of us can control our tongues completely. We all are guilty of name calling,

or judging, or gossiping about others in a hurtful way. And, according to James, our tongues are a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

So, then, we might ask—why did God ever create us with tongues in the first place?! For that answer, we must go back to the very beginning of the Bible, to the story of creation and Adam and Eve. The answer is really pretty simple--we were created with tongues to speak, so we could communicate our love to God and to one another.

At the heart of our humanity is the desire to praise God and to praise one another. God enjoys our praise, and we all enjoy praise, too!

We are hard-wired to love praise and thanksgiving, because we are made in the image of God, and God loves praise and thanksgiving. Loving praise from others is not a sign of weakness—it is the way God created us. The Psalms are full of giving God praise and God likes that! We are made in the image of God.

Conversely, God does not like to be judged or ridiculed, put down or slandered, and neither do we.

As much as we can accomplish by using our brain, and loving one another with all our hearts, we can't give praise and thanksgiving with our brain or our heart. I believe that is why God gave us tongues! We

have to speak to give a brother or sister a boost. We have to speak to give our praise to God and to one another.

In Genesis, it is when God spoke, that creation and community came together. Created in God's image means we are made to do in our limited spheres what God does in the universal sphere, namely help all elements of creation live in mutual encouragement and in such a way that ALL experience abundance.

We have a choice in the way we speak. We can build each other up, or we can tear another down. When we choose to gossip—whatever our words are—for good or for bad—what we are saying says volumes about ourselves.

We can't ever take words back, but we can say, "I'm sorry." We can't undo a past wrong, but we can say, "Will you forgive me?" Those words just might be that small rudder or the little bridle or bit that begins to direct that relationship back towards openness, respect, and concern and away from tension, suspicion and hostility.

As baptized siblings, we are saved by the grace of God—saved in order to be gracious to others. Is that what our tongues are saying? Is that the latest gossip you dished out?