

“You Are Your Words” – James 3:1-12

I don't know about you, but I've had it up to 'here' with elections and electioneering. It's bad enough that we are in the longest electioneering period in our country's history, but made worse by the fact that the presidential primaries are ramping up in our neighbour to the south. I am, frankly, sick and tired of the endless (and mostly meaningless) blah-blah-blah to which we are being subjected day after day after day. All the 'talking heads' on TV remind me of early versions of talking dolls – you know the kind, when you pressed the hidden button the doll would utter a phrase. The similarity with today's politicians is that they, like those dolls, repeat the same phrase over and over and over again every time the button is pushed. Maybe it has always been this way, and the problem is that I am getting more observant and less patient as I grow older, but don't you ever wish as I do that just once, just once, one of the politicians would actually say what they mean?

I know, I know ... this is a deliberate tactic cooked up in the back rooms of the political parties designed to keep their people from making gaffes on live media, and with the hope that they will appear “bullet-proof.” Sadly, however, the back-room schemers have missed the point that we are our words, i.e. we are defined by what we say and if what comes out is meaningless talking points and other pap then these people are being defined as empty robots that could be replaced by a \$25 computer called a Raspberry Pi!

To be sure, the back-room schemers and manipulators and their front men and women are not stupid, and I'm pretty sure they live by the credo that the author of the book James wrote “to the twelve tribes in the diaspora” – namely that the tongue is a most powerful force. James uses analogies such as a ship's rudder and the tiny fire that ignites massive forest fires to illustrate how such a relatively small part of us can provide such an influence on those around us. It makes one wonder what the situation was in the early church that prompted the author of this document to issue this advice and the other interesting cautions found here. We, like the great 24-hour news cable channels, have to speculate with great abandon since this is a very general document written to a huge audience, unlike the rather personal letters written by Paul to deal with very specific issues in particular congregations. One strong possibility, however, given the introductory urgings at the beginning of the letter, is that the situation referred to was persecution of the faithful. We have seen throughout history how the power of whispers is enough to have people put to death. Of course the capture, arrest, and murder of Jews in World War II on the basis of whispered betrayals by neighbours comes immediately to mind, but other examples abound including dangerous times in the Ukraine, China, Ireland, Bosnia, North Korea, and Afghanistan.

But we have to speculate about the issues here, because in contrast to Paul's complaints that “I have heard that some of you say ...”, here we have a wide-ranging repertoire of cautions and advice about how to live faithfully in challenging times and circumstances, and it contains a great deal of wisdom and good advice. The examples offered here of the leverage that the tongue has to effect great results may not be completely relevant to today's listener, but certainly were so at the time. For example, most of us have heard about the bit that is used to control a horse, but I suspect few of us have even seen a bit up close, let alone have inserted one into a horse's mouth – being very careful not to get ‘bit’ ourselves! Most of us are more familiar with boats, however, even if our sea cruises have been limited to the comforts and luxuries of the BC Ferries, and so we can easily understand the example of a ship's rudder. Also from watching forest fires devastate huge tracts of land here in BC, in California, and even in an area with which James might have been familiar – Greece, we know all too clearly how one little spark can ignite a blaze that consumes everything within a massive area.

We need to note, however, that even though James tends to see the glass as three-quarters empty or even seven-eighths empty his point is not all doom and gloom. Even though he emphasises the negative aspects of the power of the tongue – “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (whew!) – he winds up this particular tongue-lashing with a really key positive understanding. That understanding is that the tongue is as capable of being powerfully good as of being powerfully bad – for from the mouth,

according to James, comes not only curses but blessings. The same organ is used both “to bless the Lord and Father, and to curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” When we recognize this bit of positivism in the middle of his warnings I think we can begin to understand that James is not only acknowledging that the tongue can be used for good as well as evil but he is strongly urging that it be used for good. Moreover, from his opening it seems that this advice is being targeted at teachers of the faith.

How relevant that urging and advice still is today. Further, when we broaden our understanding of the role of teacher to include all of us who would teach others what it means to be Christian we begin to understand that this message is not only for teaching elders, otherwise known as ministers, nor only for those who teach Sunday School, but for every one of us who claim to be followers of Christ.

You’ve heard me mention before the writings of Peter Block, who claims that “communities are defined by the conversations they have.” Block doesn’t write from a specifically Christian perspective, but at the same time he is echoing the same understanding as James, namely that what we say has the power to shape our contexts. Think about this in simple terms for a moment. If a group of people, for example a congregation, carry on negative discussions – “we’re small; we’re not very good at what we do; we’re declining; things are not as good as they used to be” – then what do you think will result? That’s right – like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the congregation will indeed be small, be not very good at what it does, will continue to decline, and certainly won’t be as good as it used to be. We can look around and see congregations that do just that, and that is exactly the outcome. The power of the tongue to destroy a congregation is almost without limit.

But if a congregation holds different kinds of conversations, for example conversations that focuses instead upon invitation, possibilities, ownership, commitment, gifts, and hospitality, can you imagine the kind of congregational community that would result? This is not to say that all such conversations are dripping with syrupy sweetness, for honest dissent is a legitimate part of the conversations – indeed, if the dissent is part of the whole communities’ conversations instead of being carried out as sub (or subversive) conversations in parking lots and shopping malls then dissent is a healthy part of the community-building conversation. People in community won’t always agree, but if they can agree to work it out together then that is true and healthy community.

Can you hear what James is urging, and what Block is outlining? Can you see how a community, a group, a congregation is defined by the words they use? How a community that focuses upon possibilities eventually comes to see those possibilities realized? How a group that discusses taking ownership of the group becomes involved in owning the group, helping to define it through both their discussion and their involvement? How a church that talks about the gifts that each has to offer to the group begins to see those gifts used, and how the church blossoms as a result?

We’ve seen examples of this positive influence. For instance, the historic joint worship service this Summer to recognize the Truth and Reconciliation Report ... the first time in anyone’s memory that all the downtown churches have gotten together in this way. Our rebuilding project is perhaps the best example of how positive conversations have led to a project that projects hope not only within our own congregation but across the city and even across the country.

As individuals, and especially as communities, we are defined by our words – the words that we use signal our thoughts, our hopes, our dreams – or the lack of them. The tongues that bless the Lord and Father need not curse those made in God’s image, but as James points out may indeed be put to use in a higher calling, teaching others about the love, grace, and mercy shown by God in Christ, our Lord, and inviting them to share in the possibilities of our community of faith.