

Faith that Works 2: *What We Say Matters*

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from the pulpit of
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Mark 7:31-37

³¹Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Eph-pha-tha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it

takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a

small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed

among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every

species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the

tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of

God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the

same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine yield figs? No more can salt

water yield fresh.

Last Sunday, when we began this series on the Letter of James, the scripture reminded us not to forget what we see when we look in the mirror. When we look in the mirror we should see the image of God reflected back to us. When we leave the house and go out into the community, James encourages us to remember our own likeness of God so that we will also see that very image of God in the faces of others. And then to behave accordingly. James calls for our actions to be evidence of the faith that we carry within us, and thus – the letter offers practical wisdom for living the faith, for a faith that works.

Today’s lesson offers perhaps the strongest admonition in all of scripture regarding the importance and power of human speech. What we say matters because human speech is further evidence that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Now, although we live in a time of uncommon vulgarity, James is not merely warning about foul language, about outbursts of cuss words, said in frustration or fury. The concern is for more than generalized ways we often litter our language with the kinds of words my mother would have threatened to take a bar of soap to one of her children’s mouths. Never happened... but the threat always hovered.

No, James is addressing the words we use to build up or to destroy, to curse or to bless; and guiding us to take seriously the sheer power of human speech. God created the universe with a word: *Let there be...* and everything God spoke into being was good, very good. Likewise, our speech has the power to create worlds. Worlds of hatred, racism, xenophobia and violence or worlds of beloved community.

American novelist and poet, farmer and activist, Wendell Berry, has observed that today’s divisions and disintegration of community are closely related to the disintegration of language. “My impression,” Wendell Berry writes, “is that we have seen a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless OR destructive of meaning.”¹

¹ Berry quoted by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 7.

Marilyn McEntyre put it this way in her book, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, “the moral implications of careless stewardship of language has dulled our conscience...” and has the power to destroy individuals and communities.² The Bible’s full teaching on speech instructs us to use our words to build up human community, and the call of the gospel, according to James, is to pay close attention, because once a harmful word, or a destructive word gets unleashed, it’s impossible to reign it in.

The story goes: a man went to his rabbi with a question. “Rabbi, I understand almost all of the law. I understand the commandment not to kill. I understand the commandment not to steal. What I don’t understand is why there is a commandment against slandering the neighbor.” The rabbi looked at the man and said, “I will give you an answer, but first I have a task for you. I would like you to gather a sack of feathers and place a single feather on the doorstep of each house in the village. When you have finished, return for your answer.” The man did as he was told and soon returned to the rabbi to announce the task was complete. “Now, Rabbi, give me the answer to my question. Why is it wrong to insult or gossip about my neighbor?” “Ah,” the rabbi said, “One more thing. I want you to go back and collect all the feathers before I give you the answer.” “But Rabbi,” the man protested, “the feathers will be impossible to collect. The wind will have blown them away.” “So it is with the lies and ugly things we say about others.” The rabbi said, “They can never be retrieved. They are like feathers in the wind.”³

This parable illustrates - of course - the practical wisdom we receive from James today: words, once spoken, are just out there, floating where they will, without any chance of being taken back. And we all know words can do great harm. The smallest, careless word can be like a spark that starts a destructive fire. A word has the power to hurt or destroy

² Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 19ff.

³ Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, “Watch Your Mouth, Foundry UMC, 9/16/18.

everything in its wake: relationships, confidence, trust, peace; a genuine sense of community. All of these things are laid to waste in the path of thoughtless slander or careless conjecture or cruel teasing or hateful speech. Words “activate” things, including violence, as we can see across the landscape of our nation and of our world.

James illustrates the strength of words by using some playful but powerful metaphors. The tongue, he says, is like a horse’s bridle, or a ship’s rudder, or a small fire, in its ability to generate great impact on the lives of others. Words can cause great harm – if not held in check by responsible thoughts and motivations. Words also have the power of great blessing: to tear down dividing walls; to build up genuine human community; to create relationships, confidence, trust, and peace. Words have the strength to heal.

Our gospel reading, as a matter of fact, comes at the end of a long series of miracle stories in Mark. Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand, walking on water, curing a demon possessed child, and finally the healing of the man born deaf and unable to speak. These other miracles seem to build to this climactic one of Jesus’ power to extend divine grace. When this one is accomplished – the fourth miracle in a row, the crowds shout: *He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak*, as if to say – this person’s God-given gift to hear and to speak IS the ultimate restoration to human community as it should be.

Friends, we all know, especially during this presidential election season, that words are being hurled around. Speech is being used to put opponents down; to further divide us – one against another; to damage community rather than build it up. This may be more glaring in political discourse, but the misuse of appropriate language is not limited to politics. We have all witnessed a word uttered in haste or fury which swirled destruction around a family for years. We have seen chatter among circles of friends and associations cause great harm and injury. We ourselves have been injured by something said, and we have said things we have deeply regretted. What we say matters. Why?

One scholar answers this ancient biblical question of human speech saying: “It may seem a trivial matter, but at the heart of how we speak is a faithful response to God, and undisciplined speech poses a constant threat. Christian faith, he goes on, both permits and calls forth a relationship with God that has integrity; faith operates out of God-given wisdom and a friendship and loyalty with God alone. This Letter of James urges Christians not to speak against another, for the gift of speech is a primary means to overcome human division, cruelty and even violence.”⁴

The *On Being Project* which offers the remarkable podcasts and radio interviews between Krista Tippett and leading scholars in the arts and sciences has developed a set of what they call Grounding Virtues. These values are introduced this way: “What We Practice, We Become. “These six grounding virtues guide everything we do,” they post on their website. Virtues, they write, are not the stuff of saints and heroes. They are spiritual technologies and tools for the art of living.”

On Being places this grounding virtue at the top of their list: Words that Matter. “We are starved for fresh language to approach each other. We need *words that shimmer* – words with power that convey real truth, words which cannot be captured in mere fact. Words have the force of action and become virtues in and of themselves. The words we use shape how we understand ourselves, how we interpret the world, how we treat others. Words are one of our primary ways to reach across the mystery of each other.”⁵

Now, the writer of the Letter of James would not have used that language - words are spiritual technologies and tools for the art of living. But I believe that is the perfect interpretation of what James means for us as people of faith at this moment in time. So may we use *words that shimmer* – words with power that convey real truth. May we use words

⁴ *Texts for Preaching – Year B*, p. 511.

⁵ Onbeing.org.

that have the force of action to become virtues in and of themselves,
because what we practice, we become.

AMEN.