

Our Words Can Wound, Our Words Can Heal
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"Our Words Can Wound, Our Words Can Heal" Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC, September 13, 2015

(James 3:1-12) Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

When my father was beginning his teaching career, he coached Middle School Boys Basketball. Black River is still known for excellent football and wrestling. Basketball not so much. So the mighty Black River Pirates were playing in their Conference Tournament and none of the calls were going their way. In exasperation with the referees, my dad (uncharacteristically I might add) kicked the bench several times with his heel. He never received a warning from the refs, but obviously this was not ideal behavior—getting upset about calls and then kicking the bench. Eventually, dad pulled out one of his star players Alan Young. Wouldn't you know it, but being annoyed with the way the game was going—Alan kicked the bench and the referees issued a Technical Foul.

My mom didn't always attend games, but with this being a Conference Tournament, she was there to be supportive. And when they got home, my dad said that he couldn't believe Alan kicked the bench and got a Technical—he needs to be less high-strung! My mom was all over this, saying Alan kicked the bench because he observed you, his teacher and coach, kicking the bench. So he did it too! This was quite a learning experience for a new teacher and first year Basketball Coach, and dad didn't repeat this mistake again. The funny thing is that my dad's former player—Al Young—is the Varsity Football Coach at Black River High School and has more wins in high school football (170 and counting!) than any other coach in Medina County. And we take sports very seriously in Medina County, Ohio. Al went on to become a fantastic teacher and coach.

There's always a learning curve when we begin new endeavors, whether folks are new coaches, teachers, parents, in a new relationship, at a new school, moving to a new community, entering a new phase in one's life—we don't always get it right immediately. Sometimes these transitions are downright painful, embarrassing, and overwhelming. In my family, we can laugh about the kicking the bench incident from my dad's first season coaching basketball, but it was a significant learning experience. In James' Letter we heard the rather harsh statement, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."^[1] The implication is that teachers are judged by the consistency between one's words and actions. Good teachers have a lasting influence on students.

Think about some of the best teachers you've had in your life. What made them so wonderful? Maybe they took extra time to explain a problem you just didn't understand. Maybe they were patient when your class got a little rowdy and called you back together with a smile and not harsh words. Maybe their passion was contagious and they helped you fall in love with the subject at hand. Maybe you just knew instinctively that they cared about you and wanted you to succeed.

Some people are teachers by profession. Yet most of us will find ourselves teaching at some point in our lives whether we have an Education Degree or not. When a child hears something difficult in the news and they turn to their parents and ask, "Why did this happen?" Your response comes in the form of teaching. You teach your children the ways of the world by the way you respond to their question. Maybe you say that sometimes bad things happen to good

people. There's ways we can help people who are hurting, and we can start by praying for them tonight when we go to bed. Teaching our Christian faith happens in many forms, and the most important religious voice in the lives of children and youth is their parents. If church is a priority for your family, kids notice and learn how much better life can be when you're part of a faith community.

Just as we can remember wonderful teachers whose words and actions were consistent, we also can remember teachers we didn't particularly care for. The Letter of James has something to say about this too when the author speaks about the power of words. With our tongues we can bless God and curse those made in God's likeness. "From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so."^[2] A teacher who doesn't practice what they teach—people see right through that after a while. A Christian who says they love God but then goes around hating on God's people—there's a disconnect there, right? All of us make mistakes. But our words express our will and direct our actions.

We have so many more months of listening to presidential candidates, and I'll just speak for myself here to confess that I already have moments of being sick and tired of political rhetoric. When political candidates personally attack each other, it makes our country look rather pathetic. It teaches the world something about us as Americans. The attacking and then let me tell you about my platform mentality does the very thing that the Letter of James warned us about! "From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." Salt water can't all of a sudden yield fresh water. Fig trees can't all of a sudden sprout olives or grapes. People who are making disparaging, hateful remarks can't all of a sudden be loving and kind—at least not sincerely. It feels like we've gotten so good at saying what we're against, but what are we for? That's what we're called to consider. Our words have power. Our words reveal what's going on underneath the surface. Not all of us are professional educators, but we are teaching nonetheless whether we are politicians or parents or preachers or just people.

Make no mistake, this is really hard stuff! The Letter of James declares "No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison."^[3] Harsh. But you know that terrible phrase that sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me? Not true, totally wrong. Why? Because the tongue can be full of deadly poison if you will. Words can and do hurt. Words can heal and words can wound.

This week I spent Wednesday morning at the Boston Convention Center hearing Brene Brown give a keynote address. She's amazing—teaching at The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and writing about vulnerability, courage, shame, and worthiness. Brene Brown clarifies that there's a difference between guilt and shame. Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad.^[4] She teaches these differences to her students and her own children. Shame isn't a good way to teach someone a lesson. When she once yelled at the family dog by saying, "You're a bad dog!" It was her son that corrected her with, "She's not a bad dog, mom. She just did something bad."

Kids pick up on the lessons we teach. We'll make mistakes. We'll do things and say things that will eventually cause us to feel guilty, and that's okay. Sometimes we mess up, and that's why we need to confess our sins to God and focus on repentance and reconciliation. Guilt (feeling like I did something bad) can be used in positive ways to affect changes in our behavior. But shame (feeling like I am bad) begins a downward spiral into feelings of worthlessness. We can use our words to build each other up or tear each other down. Each of us has a whole lot of power.

Near the end of her talk, Brene Brown related that we think we're cognitive beings who occasionally feel. In actuality, we're feeling beings who occasionally think. I wanted to

challenge her statement since she's from Texas and hasn't been around heady New Englanders like I have. But if we're honest—this is true even in Lexington, Massachusetts. We are feeling beings who occasionally think. Don't believe me? That's why no matter how tough and smart and successful and gorgeous we appear on the outside, it may take just one harsh statement from someone we love to bring up feelings of shame. We are feeling beings who occasionally think.

In the end, our Christian faith calls us to question the culture in which we live. Our faith compels us to question mean-spirited political campaigns, bullying in person or online, anonymous feedback meant to hurt, using the Bible as a weapon, saying words that curse God's children. We're called to challenge all that negativity because we know that God wants so much more for us. Let's use our words to bless. Let's use our words to heal. Let's speak words of love. And let's begin today. Amen.

[1] James 3:1, NRSV.

[2] James 3:10.

[3] James 3:8.

[4] Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, 71.