

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

The Bit and Bridle

Sermon Reflection Notes

The New Testament book of James is the first of the “general” or “catholic” epistles. James presents itself as a letter, but it is not addressed to a specific group of people and the situations addressed in the letter are not related to specific local issues. Rather, there are 59 imperatives included in the 108 verses of James, all of which are like wisdom literature in that the concern has to do with living the right kind of life.

James 3:1-12 is a self-contained essay which connects us to ideas found in Genesis. God spoke the world into existence and breathed life into us. And we, in turn, are created in God’s image. We have the power to speak things into existence too...a power that often runs away with us. James suggests that not many of us should become teachers because teachers face stricter judgment. Well-known theologian Barbara Brown Taylor said: “Whether judgment is by God, our congregants, or the world, James does not say - although most of us would testify that judgment is not future but already underway.”

We understand this tendency to judge; we frequently find ourselves judging others’ words and placing them under microscopes to dissect meaning. What we often fail to understand is the impact and importance of our own words on others. Words are hard and we slip up. We are not perfect, as James points out in verse 2.

Rev. Beaton suggested that United Methodists have a complicated history with the word ‘perfect.’ As sanctification people (*people who are always growing in grace and working to be more like Jesus*), we strive toward perfection. But James’s reference to perfection comes from the Greek word *telios*, which translates best into the word *maturity*.

James uses the metaphor of the bit and bridle to demonstrate how the smallest thing can make the biggest difference. The bit and bridle allow a person to control an animal more than twice his/her size. The rudder of a ship directs the entire vessel. The tongue is a fire, capable of setting a forest ablaze.

With our words, we can create hope and celebration and joy and comfort. Or we can create chaos, devastation, despair, ruin. Paul wrote to the Galatians that you can tell if the things we do and say are of God – of the Holy Spirit – because our words and actions produce fruit. We are called to produce fruit that is sweet and life giving, words that bless and build up, words that celebrate, words that love.

To create such words, to remember that we are created in the image of God, takes practice. Let our words flow like clear fresh water as we practice the language of God, the language of love.

Scripture

James 3:1-12 (NRSVUE)

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will face stricter judgment. ² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And 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 life, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Discussion Questions

1. Rev. Beaton has mentioned in several sermons now that we are created in the image of God, and that as such, we too have the power to speak things into existence. What does this make you think about?
2. In American culture, what does 'perfection' or 'being perfect' bring to mind? As United Methodists, what do we mean when we speak of 'going on to perfection'?
3. How *do* we speak things into existence and create worlds with our words?
4. Rev. Beaton suggested that we practice using our words – so that when the time comes, we can speak like a Christian. Where and how do we learn the language of a Christian? How do we practice it?
5. What does it sound like to 'speak like a Christian,' in particular a 'mature' Christian?

Closing Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, your Word has given birth to all of creation, and your Word continues to call us toward goodness, mercy, and justice. And you call us, through our words, to create a world of goodness, mercy, and justice in Your name. All too often, we use our words to tear down, to divide, or to make others feel small and unworthy. We pray for your forgiveness, and we ask for your help that we might use covenant building words so that acceptance, belonging, peace, and unity might become a new creation among us. We pray in the name of the One who used his words for healing and justice, Jesus the Christ. Amen,

"Practice the language of God; practice the language of love."