

## **BLESSING AND CURSING**

James 3:1-12

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
16 September 2018

Words have the power to heal and to harm. We all know this. We can all remember times when we have been stung by words. We may even recall the exact words spoken to us, even if it was many decades ago.

Here's what I have observed about those memories. While you may remember something a teacher or a classmate said that hurt your feelings, the words that cause the most harm are those spoken by the people closest to you, especially a parent. When the people who are supposed to love you unconditionally say something that makes you feel diminished, those words can inflict a wound that lasts a lifetime. Now all parents lose their patience and speak without thinking occasionally. It's the pattern of verbal abuse that does real damage.

If we are honest, everyone in this room can remember times when we have said something hurtful. Sometimes because we're tired, sometimes because we intentionally want to lash out. Sometimes we apologize.

We can also, of course, think of times when someone has said something incredibly kind to us, especially at a time when we needed it the most. We remember saying, "Thank you for saying that; it makes me feel so much better." We may remember compliments especially coming from someone whose opinion matters a great deal to us, or someone who is usually quite critical.

But isn't it interesting how the negative words seem to stick in our memory as if placed there with super glue, while the positive words seem to fade away? Or how one word of criticism can erase dozens of good ones?

It happens to me. I'll receive several generous comments after the worship service, people thanking me for a service that was meaningful to them, or a sermon that touched them. But perhaps, on that same Sunday, one person will pick at a point I made, or tell me I mis-spoke about a detail, or criticize another aspect of the worship, and which do I think about all day? Do I bask in the glow of the praise? No, I stew about the one comment which seemed as if it had been shot like an arrow right to my gut.

The writer of the book of James wants us to be aware of the power of words. He starts by reminding teachers, leaders, people whose words have authority that they should be exceptionally careful because their words influence others.

But the same advice applies to all of us, he says. The tongue may be small, but it can influence one's whole life. Just like the rudder of a ship influences the direction the ship is going. Just like a small flame can start a forest fire. Don't underestimate what your words can do.

The teacher who tells her student that "she probably just isn't college material" might cause that student to give up prematurely on her education. The teacher who tells his student to pursue his dreams, despite a learning disability, opens the horizons for him. Our words have power and influence. That's really the essence of this message from this passage.

OK, you might say, that makes sense. But what does this have to do with Christianity? Why is this advice in the Bible? What is particularly Christian about this advice?

The book of James is a part of the Bible known as wisdom literature. The book of James is written as general advice for early Christians. He presumes that they already know the important stories of Jesus. Now they need to be taught how to live in the world.

You could make the argument that Benjamin Franklin could have written today's passage. Or Dear Abby. Anyone with an understanding of human nature.

But words have particular meaning for Christians. We are sometimes called people of the Book, because of the importance we place on the words in the Bible.

The first words of the gospel of John are these: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God...John, the most mystical of the gospel writers, was searching for a way to describe the nature and character of Jesus the Christ, and what he came up with was this: "Jesus is God's word made flesh."

As part of our opening hymn, we sang these words, "He formed the creatures with a word and then pronounced them good." God creates with words. God speaks the world into being. "Let there be light." God names the world. Creation doesn't happen with a magic wand, or physical power, but with the simple, profound act of speech.

In the world of the Bible, things and people don't become real until they are given names. And if the fundamental character of a person changes or if that person's purpose changes, then that person's name changes too. Abraham and Sarah are given new names. Saul becomes Paul. Because names and words matter.

What the Bible consistently says about words is that words have power.

I want to give you a couple of questions to think about this week. First, "What are the words that you tell yourself?" Have you ever paid attention to your own self-talk, the messages you give yourself? Do you ever find yourself thinking, or saying to yourself, or

even saying out loud, “I’m so stupid”. “I’m clumsy and uncoordinated.” Or “I’ll never figure out my iPhone.” What is the impact of your messages to yourself? Sometimes perhaps you’re just being funny; sometimes these messages are harmless. But if words have power, and if you consistently demean yourself with your words, it might be worth trying to change those habits.

Second, pay attention to the words that you ingest into your mind. We have learned, like it or not, to pay attention to the food and drink and other substances we put into our bodies, to notice how certain foods make us feel. If I drink coffee after 4 PM, I sometimes can’t sleep well that night. Certain foods make me feel energetic and certain foods make me feel sluggish. If I want to be at my optimal health, I pay attention to what my body is telling me.

The words we let into our eyes and ears seep into our minds and souls. They even affect us physically. For example, where do you get your news? What messages are you receiving from those news outlets and how do they make you feel? If the news you receive is negative to the point of hysterical, if you’re receiving doom and gloom messages about how bad things are, those words could make you feel depressed, apathetic, less likely to want to become involved in the work of mission and justice and making the world a better place. There are news outlets that are more balanced. They tell the real truth, but they also tell the stories of people who are making a difference.

When I make visits to our homebound members and those living in facilities, it’s often in the afternoon. And often, folks will have the TV on for company. If they are watching nonstop news, I will often ask them how seeing the same stories over and over

makes them feel. Sometimes we're not aware that seeing the same unhappy images multiple times can affect our psyches.

Advertisers and sales people are adept at using words to influence us. Not for nefarious purposes, but they understand the power they wield. Whole cultures have been shifted because of the use of propaganda, as people came to believe what their leaders told them, regardless of its truthfulness.

My book club discussed an interesting book last Sunday night. Entitled, One Summer: America 1927 it tells the story of an era in American history that was particularly interesting, and it's told in an engrossing style by the excellent writer Bill Bryson. 1927 was the summer of Babe Ruth, Charles Lindbergh, the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti, Al Capone, Jack Dempsey, prohibition, the creation of Mount Rushmore...and also the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Here's one of the quotes from the books which disturbed me the most: "There may never have been another time in the nation's history when more people disliked more other people from more directions and for less reason," As I read that, I thought, "Until now. Except now." The parallels are eerie. There is little belief in the goodness of government or political leaders. I recommend the book because history can be instructive. On the positive side, we're reminded that we have survived other difficult times. On the other hand, we want to believe that society, that humanity is progressing, don't we?

I can't read a steady diet of books like that one. I need to also read books about people who are making a difference. I need to see movies that uplift me and encourage me. I need to listen to interviews with people who inspire me. I am consciously aware

that I need to ingest words that help me to stay positive and engaged and hopeful and motivated.

Words have power. They shape our reality.

I have to close by telling one of my favorite stories about a former parishioner. Three years out of seminary, I was the pastor of a small church in a small town on the Illinois River. One of my parishioners, an older man named Verne, lived in the neighborhood. He would not infrequently walk to the church to say hello. He would talk about books he was reading, he would fill me in on the town gossip, more than one time he showed me his surgery scars. But I remember the time he came to see me near the end of the season of Lent. I was preparing to baptize several older children the following Sunday. This was a church in the Disciples of Christ tradition; children about the age of 12 were baptized, by immersion, in a large baptismal font in the church. Verne and I talked about the process of filling the font. I told him I understood where to stand, how much water would be in the font. Then we talked about how I put my hand behind the child's head and dunk them backwards. He said, "You have to get their mouths in the water." "What?", I said. "You know, sometimes they hold a handkerchief over their mouths so they don't choke, but you have to be sure you get their mouths all the way under." "Why, Verne?" "Because the mouth - that's where all the sinning takes place."

He was partly right. It's where the cursing takes place, the hurting, but it's also where the blessing takes place, where the loving words are spoken.