

Scripture: James 3:1-12

Sermon Title: "Words CAN Hurt"

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"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." I'm sure that we all have heard this saying before – a saying which we often are taught as children. It's a slogan of sorts that is often shared to bolster confidence and strength against teasing and bullying, as we try and take the power away from the words that flow so easily from those who wish to cause harm. The problem with this saying is that it's a lie. For in fact, words can hurt. I would venture to guess that we can all think of moments in our lives when we have been moved to sorrow, anguish, emotional distress because of the words spoken into our lives. Or we can identify moments when we have hurt others by the words that we have spoken. And this hurt that we may experience is by no means a sign of weakness on our part or on the part of anyone else as the slogan might suggest. Rather it is a testimony to the power that words do have.

I remember one time when the words I spoke caused hurt in the life of another. One morning when I was a teenager, while helping my mom and dad with the farm chores, my mom and I were having some silly conversation. I honestly can't remember what it was about – that speaks to the fact that it really wasn't that important. I imagine it had something to do with a television show or maybe something silly about school. What I do remember is that my mom and I were having a lot of laughs. Anyway, my dad was getting rather annoyed by the conversation – whatever it was! And I remember him saying, "Can't you talk about something else?" In mid-chuckle from our conversation, I turned to my dad and said, "What would you like us to talk about – tractors or cows?" I didn't mean any harm by this comment which flowed so easily from my lips, but I certainly didn't think it all the way through.

Now the morning continued and I noticed my dad got rather quiet and had a bit of angry look on his face from that point. But I didn't know why. Again, my comment was one off the cuff with no thought put into it (there is the problem actually!) So later that morning, my dad finally spoke again and said to me, "I need to fix your mom's cars.

Will you help, or isn't that good enough for you either?" And he walked away. Wow! That hit me like a ton of bricks because I still didn't know I said anything wrong or said anything to hurt him! So I went over to the car not knowing what to expect and I began to help, still wondering what I had done. And in the conversation that ensued as we worked together, my dad explained how my words earlier did in fact hurt. When I said to him, "What would you like us to talk about - tractors or cows?", he heard me disrespecting his passion - his calling in life. He heard me disrespecting all that he strived to do to care for the family. I didn't think about any of that that when I said it (again, I didn't think - that's a big part of the problem!). And as I handed him the wrenches that he needed as he worked on my mom's car, we spoke words of caring and words seeking to understand one another. I spoke words of apology. When we finished, the hurt had been addressed and was mending and we were able to go on.

Yes, words are certainly powerful. This is a power which James speaks about with passion and with vivid imagery in our scripture reading today. Though the tongue is physically small in the grand scheme of one's body, James reminds us of its great power to lead. It can be the spark which burns down a forest - reminding us of the destructive nature that something so small can have in our lives and the lives of those around us. He talks about the blessings and curses that come from the same tongue. We praise God and then say hateful and harmful things to those around us - those created in the image of God just like you and me? James says this should not be - just like water cannot be fresh and salty. And a fig tree can't produce olives. The tongue therefore, needs to choose a side. And there is a right answers here - the side that we should always be striving for should be the side of blessing. The side that speaks life into our world. The side that doesn't spark a forest fire of destruction but lights the way with hope and love. The side that nourishes. The side that leads us into good things and into righteous paths.

Will we come away doing this perfectly? No. We know that, James knows that, God knows that! Still, when our words cause us to stumble and cause hurt, our words can

also bring about healing. Let's return for a moment to the say, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Yes, physical contact speared by hate and with a desire to hurt can cause physical harm, literally breaking our bodies. And yet, at the same time, physical contact that is guided by love and care, think of the hands of doctors and nurses - I think of the hands of grandmother as she applied a bandage when I fell - physical contact guided by love can heal. The same is true for words. Yes, words that are fostered in hate can break our spirits, cause emotional damage. And yet words guided by love can begin to mend what has been broken. Even if it was our words to begin with that caused the pain (for none of us are perfect), it is never too late to speak words of healing - to share words of apology, words seeking forgiveness, words that strive to mend the wounds.

Beloved People of God, we have heard it before but it bears repeating. Let's be careful with our words. Earlier in the book of James, we heard the call to be quick to listen and slow to speak. For while we cannot control the words that others will use, we have the power to harness our words. And when we make a mistake, strive to use our words to correct it. Yet, as in all things, we can't just speak it, we must live it. For James tells us that what we say guides the whole body. What we say will then translate into what we do, or at least it should! Because like the rudder of a ship which turns the entire vessel, our words should do the same in guiding the actions of our hands, our hearts, our minds, our feet as we move into actions that live the words that we speak.

And while things may never go back to the way they once were after words have cause damage, because just like with physical wounds, wounds cause by words will leave scars, our words and our actions can be a part of the healing - weather we caused the hurt or it was caused by another. For words are powerful. Words can indeed hurt, but they can also bless. May we strive to always choose the side of words that will help, words that will bring wholeness, and words that will heal. May these words guide our actions. And may these words bring about blessing and not harm in the lives of those around us. So be it and may it be so. Amen.