

September 12, 2021

James 3:1-12

“Death by Paper Cuts”

When we lose our composure and say something we will probably regret, there are times when someone tries to hush us up by saying, **“Watch your mouth!”** And while I appreciate those who warn me of impending self-destruction by saying what I shouldn’t, I want you to know – *It doesn’t work*. It is physically impossible. Just try and look down at your mouth while you are speaking! If you really work at it you can see your lips – but it is hard to talk when your lips are extended like that. “Watch your mouth indeed!”

Anyone here who has never regretted something they said? If you put your hand up you are teasing or not at all self-aware. Each and every one of us, at some point, says something we are later sorry about. In fact, it is one of the things I struggle the most to accept God’s forgiveness for. The tapes run over and over – leave me discouraged and steal life’s energy. What we say – what other people say – words which land in our ears and take root in our hearts – affect us in deep and abiding ways.

That may sound obvious – but in our time people struggle to understand the importance of words. Meanness and cruelty abound in standard conversation – and are given a pass as par for the course. And just when I am willing to blame television and radio programs, I am reminded that James had none of those and people in his community of faith struggled with the power of language as well. James wants us to know ***what we say is mighty beyond our expectations.***

All of his images – ships, fires, the pit of hell – all have to do with impressing upon us that *what we say matters* more than most of us have imagined. James has been trying to impress on us in this ***letter how deeply our believing and doing are woven together.*** And in today’s passage the focus on believing and doing has to do with what we say.

We have been subject lately to excellent pictures of awful fires: catastrophic and life changing. Often, the thing which starts them is small and unimpressive: A cigarette, a spark, an ember from a fire which didn’t go out. Something terrifying has come from something which seemed unimportant. James wants us to make this connection – to understand that what seems small can become much more.

Long before the current pandemic we learned that to dismiss a virus or microbe because it was small could be folly – as that small and imperceptible thing can kill.

And yet, it has not been uncommon in the community of faith over the years to imagine that **only major transgressions count**. Paul told us that if we break any part of the law, we are subject to all of it...but that really doesn't make sense to us so we tend not to believe him.

Do we really believe not telling the truth about someone is the same as murder? We don't. Do we imagine that stealing a candy bar, or office supplies is the functional equivalent of robbing a bank? No way. So, what is Paul after and why does James care so much about what we say?

How many of you have ever had a paper cut? They are more than annoying. They are painful and can ruin your day. And if you multiply that by 2 or 5 or 10? At some point those small cuts can put the sum of what makes us "us" on the sideline.

Most of us don't believe the small things will do us any harm. James says it is almost certain they will. The stretching of what we know to be true. The unnecessary harshness of a reply. The delight and perpetuation of gossip. Tearing down instead of building up another person. They don't feel earth shattering – but we know better. We know better because we have been on the business end of unnecessary shaming, unkind words and gossip. We know these things do not lead us in God's way but undermine our motivation to try.

There may be no better place to apply the golden rule than in what we say and how we speak. Take a moment and remember when someone important **said the right word to you**. Someone encouraged you at just the moment you needed. Someone affirmed you when you had all but given up on yourself. Remember the accepting spirit of someone who held you in uncertainty and gave you permission to be. It is life giving to remember these people. These are the people we want to emulate. These are the people who have shown us *that even if we never completely tame our speech – we can do better*. And what we do and say really matters.

Notice I didn't ask you to remember when someone was mean to you – when someone hurt you or when you were misunderstood. Friends, we already remember those things and they are not our north star. Let them go. Release them into the Spirit drenched atmosphere of worshiping God.

Too often, friends, we suffer from too many cuts – too many hurts – too many small mistakes we didn't imagine could matter. More than we know, the people of God are set back by too many little things - paper cuts – and all of them together steal our life's energy from us – as individuals and as a community of faith.

The world rises and falls on the grace of God. And God has given us remarkable opportunity. It is ours to carry God's life in the world – and know that what we do matters. Remember those whose life and words have blessed you – and live in their spirit.

Don't watch your mouth – fill your heart – share the gifts of grace which are yours. Let us bind each other's wounds with kind words and hopeful dispositions. So that what we do, as small as it may be, will bring life.