

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 19B: James 3.1-12

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Maybe you've heard the old joke about the novice who is entering monastic life. We'll call him Jackson. Upon his arrival, Brother Jackson is welcomed by the abbot, who explains that the monks in this order take a vow of silence, which is broken only once a year and with only a single word. After a year, Brother Jackson sits down with the abbot to speak his word and says, "the." Then he returns to the quiet life of contemplation that he's chosen. Another year passes and he returns to the abbot's office for their annual chat, and Jackson says, "food," and goes back to his cell. Well, time flies when you're biting your tongue. At the end of one more year the monk returns to his superior and says, "stinks." And the abbot says, "You know, Jackson, you've been here for three years now and you've done nothing but complain."

Have you ever considered that, whether you're a chatterbox or a monk, each of us will speak only so many words over the course of a day, over the course of a year, over the course of a lifetime. Which words will you choose to spend your precious breath speaking into the world?

The epistle of James had a famous critic during the Reformation. His name was Martin Luther. Interestingly enough, that critic had a infamously fiery tongue. In a tract titled "Against the Roman Papacy," he wrote things like, "You are blasphemous, abominable rascals and damned scum of Satan." And "You are such outrageous, shameless blockheads." Mind you, these were among the curses the great theologian saw fit to print, not unfortunate remarks made after one too many steins at the biergarten.

I found these quotes during the painstaking research you've come to expect from these sermons, on a website dedicated entirely to Luther's insults. The homepage displays only a small image of Martin Luther's head above the text of one of his rants. Below that is a little box that says, "Insult me again." You can click it and get a fresh Lutheran insult each time you do. For obvious reasons I bookmarked it in my browser.

Well, being someone who chose to spend a significant number of his lifetime word count insulting the pope, maybe it won't surprise you that Luther called the Book of James an "epistle of straw." He thought it was fit only to be burned. It must have cramped his literary style considerably to read, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire." This is a far wiser saying than the one about sticks and stones, is it not? Oh the damage these tongues of ours can do.

Luther, you may recall, preferred the letters of Paul, which James can seem to be challenging in his. Though, to James's credit, he didn't get ugly. Paul wrote to communities formed around the radical gospel of grace that Jesus lived and taught. His overarching message is summarized nicely in Ephesians. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works..."

Paul thought that we humans keep falling back into the deadly understanding of religion as a kind of divine performance review. As if the project of the spiritual life is to do good works in hopes that God will be pleased enough not to smite us, and will maybe even tell St. Peter to let us through the pearly gates when our time comes. Paul was adamant that this was not the gospel. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was the ultimate expression of the truth that God does the work of redemption as a pure and unqualified gift. All that's left for us to do is try to believe that broken and imperfect lives like ours could be included in that perfect love, and then live out of the gratitude that results.

The book of James can sound like a refutation of Paul's theology. But, with apologies to dear old Luther, I don't think it is at all. When James says elsewhere that faith without works is dead, he was just asking us to be real. It's not that our faith *ought* to show up in what we say and what we do. It just does. And we're kidding ourselves if we think otherwise.

I think we can all relate. It's been said before that if you want to know what someone believes in, don't ask for a personal mission statement. Take a look at their checkbook and their calendar. How I actually spend my money and my days will tell you more about what I hold dear than, say, a sermon I wrote mainly to impress you with my sermonizing skills. I think all James was saying was, "Look. If nothing in your life looks like it's fired by gratitude for the gift of grace, it probably isn't. In fact, you might just be using words like grace and forgiveness and mercy because these are respectable things to say among good Christian people. Which, you might have noticed, means you're actually right back in the realm of performance review. Doing and saying things in hopes that they'll count for goodness points by whoever is keeping the score." Put another way, maybe James was saying, "Listen to your life. It will tell you who you are and what you believe."

What we heard from James today was that we should listen, in particular, to our speech. We should consider what words we choose to put out into the world.

Now, what I think St. Paul and even that crank Martin Luther were right about is that we're not to make speech into one more good work we have to perform so God will like us. What I think James is recommending is understanding speech not as a good work, but as a practice.

Here's the difference. If I jog before I go to work each morning so that I can tell you nonchalantly that I'm the kind of guy who jogs, my jogging is a form of works righteousness. It's something I do so that you or maybe even God will think I'm a good person and hopefully treat me like one. But if I jog because it clears my head and raises my heart rate in ways that, over time, seem to help me become a little more healthy and whole, it's a practice.

Here's how it might work with regard to speech. There's a trick that you probably know all about from Pastoral Counseling 101. Use "I statements," especially in hard conversations. It was pointed out to me recently that "I think you're a jerk" does not qualify as an I statement. The point is to state your experience or your feelings rather than make a judgment about the other person. If you tell me I'm a terrible human being, there's not much room in that judgment for me to prove otherwise. But if you tell me you felt hurt or afraid or frustrated by something I said or did, there's an openness in your speech to the possibility that things between us could be different. Your hurt is still acknowledged as very real, even as you admit implicitly that neither of us may have the whole story. And let's be truthful. None of us ever has the whole story about anything or anyone.

How we speak can change our minds and our perspectives. It's not only that if I speak in certain ways there's no way for you to respond except out of defensiveness and fear. It's that my words are a bit in my own mouth, the rudder of my own boat. And if the words I choose to speak are full of judgment and blame and self-righteous anger, that's the direction my life will head off in. The good news is that practicing a different way of speaking can nudge my life in a different way. Speaking with truthfulness and humility and curiosity and openness... speaking in a way that acknowledges that I've never had the whole story about anything ... such words are not only kinder to the people nearby. They are practices that can point my life in the direction of gratitude and grace as I find whatever small and imperfect way to offer a little grace to the world with my speech.

We are all Brother Jacksons, every one of us, are we not? People with only so many words to be spoken in our lifetimes. I know I've spent too many of mine sounding like Luther, calling out the outrageous, shameless blockheads I meet or read about in the news. James's uncomfortable but hope-filled question isn't just, "What are my words doing to those blockheads?" He wants each of us also to ask, "In what direction is my speech sending my life?" The good news is that if we've got any words at all left to speak, we can still make a turn in the direction of grace.