

Friendly Words

James 3: 1-12

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

3 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

On the afternoon of December 6, 2011, actor Alec Baldwin was booted off an American Airlines flight out of LAX for failure to comply with airline regulations, particularly the one that requires you to turn off your cell phone once the cabin doors are closed. Now, you'd think that someone as worldly and well-traveled as Baldwin would know this rule, which he did; or that a violation of that rule would have to involve some kind of urgent phone call that had to be handled right then, which it didn't. What caused Baldwin's ouster, the flight attendants' ire, and the passengers' angst was all over a game called "Words With Friends".

Words With Friends is a social media app that connects networks of online friends for the purpose of playing a game and chatting. The game is kind of like Scrabble on steroids and the premise is a lot like those old-school games of playing chess by mail, except this is instant. You get a bunch of social network friends together online and play for word scores, à la Scrabble, but you also have a chance to chat online on the side. It's supposed to be a friendly game that uses words as a kind of social lubrication that brings people together. Words With Friends users have dwindled some but it is not too far away from being wildly popular in the not-so-distant past and is considered one of the most addicting apps you can have on your phone. Amy and I still play it regularly. My kids are like, you're still playing that?!

The irony of the Baldwin incident, however, is that while he was continuing to share collegial words with his friends on the phone, he was allegedly using quite different words with the flight attendants who were just trying to do their jobs. Baldwin later tweeted (on Twitter) that American Airlines is "where retired Catholic school gym teachers from the 1950s find jobs as flight attendants" and those attendants "walk the aisles of an airplane with a whistle around their neck and a clipboard in their hands." Those may have been among the more cordial words he said. According to American Airlines, Baldwin was "extremely rude" to the flight crew, calling them "inappropriate names" and using "offensive" language -- not friendly words, a theme suggested by the very app he was enjoying. The flight actually was forced to go back to the gate to deplane Baldwin which made the rest of the passengers wait. No doubt the other passenger had a few choice words for him of their own.

This story seems to be kind of a microcosm of the trap that many of us fall into in this age of technology and instant gratification. We tend to use words one way for certain people and situations and then haul out a whole different vocabulary and attitude for others. In our Consistory meeting we talked about how we use different language around people at work than we do the people at church. We can see our friends and loved ones as worthy of our attention and friendly words, and people we don't know, like flight attendants or waitresses, as less than human and deserving only of contempt and angry words. For the younger generation, I said "angry words" not "angry birds". We pay more attention to the words we type on our phones than the words we say to the people right in front of us. It's a lexical double standard and a sin. [NOTE 1]

Words With Friends is based on the principle that words can be connective, that they have value and that they can be built upon. Within the game itself there's a lesson that Mr. Baldwin and the rest of us could really use in our relationships with one another. When well-played, thought out, and carefully applied, words can bring great reward. When carelessly or caustically applied and reactively generated, words can become weapons that leave both the speaker and the recipient feeling like losers. A recent research paper ... reporting on how people process words that express emotions, claimed that half of all the words that people produce from their working vocabulary are used to express negative emotions, compared to a mere 30 percent which are used to express positive emotions and 20 percent that have a neutral context. Although the magnitude of the statistics may be questionable, the relative proportion of negative to positive words in our working vocabularies should be of concern to all of us because there is a substantial body of research that relates the words we use in our "self-talk" to our emotions, moods and relative levels of achievement. --"The power of a single word," September 11, 2009, orble.com/the-power-of-a-single-word. Retrieved April 9, 2012. There is an old Chinese proverb that reads, "A bad word whispered will echo a hundred miles."

The writer of James identified the problem with words in this famous passage about the tongue in chapter 3. We might, in fact, think of James as kind of the original writer on the rules of using words with friends *and everyone else*. For James, those who are in the game of using words had better be sure to use them wisely! [NOTE 2]

James first warns those who aspire to become teachers because "we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (v. 1). Any teacher, in church or in school, must know that his or her words carry great weight and can very easily harm or encourage a student. And while "all of us make many mistakes," it's important for teachers (and all of us) to strive for perfect word choice that becomes a "bridle" for controlling the kind of loose and destructive talk that can inevitably leak out and cause destruction (v. 2). Indeed, like a bit in the mouth of a horse, a controlled tongue can guide a person's whole "body" in what he says and does (v. 3). But even a bridle doesn't work all the time. My sister Katy had a horse that would quick tuck in it's chin to get slack and bite down on the bridle and go wherever she pleased, which was often under a tree to knock you off your horse. That was the last time I rode that horse. Nowhere does James claim that it is easy to control the tongue.

Then in verse 4, James picks up two additional metaphors for the tongue: first, by equating it with a rudder for a ship, and, second, by comparing it to a spark that has the potential to light a forest ablaze. The relatively tiny rudder of a very large ship has as much to do with where the ship goes according to the "will" of the pilot, as does the wind that drives the sails (v. 4). Like a small rudder on a large ship, the words we use have the ability to steer us toward safety and love or cruelty and disaster. We have to be diligent in taking the wheel (v. 5). Even a small word, ill-spoken and timed, can set a whole forest fire of disaster in motion -- a "world of iniquity" that corrupts the whole person and those around him or her (v. 6).

There's a story about the famous nineteenth-century preacher, Henry Ward Beecher. One Sunday, he ascended the great pulpit of Boston's Plymouth Congregational Church, and there he found a note waiting for him. Beecher glanced at the note, then announced, "I received a letter from one of you this morning. It states quite simply, 'Fool.'" Beecher paused, then grinned maliciously. "I often receive letters from people who forget to sign their names," he said, "but this is the first time someone has signed their name and forgotten to write the letter."

Beecher, quick on his feet, found a snappy comeback, but even for him, the criticism must have stung. There's such a thing as criticism offered in love, of course -- courteous words of correction from a teacher, or coach, or spouse or friend, sincerely intended to build up. But there is also that other sort of criticism: the kind that tears down, that gouges, that destroys.

The human tongue may be applied to the cause of evil, or to good. The tongue can deliver a testimonial address. It can also taunt and mock and needle and nag. The tongue can swear allegiance. It can also tell lies, or cheat or vainly boast. The tongue can utter public prayer. Or, it can quickly make the air foul with profanity. The tongue can offer a wedding vow. Or, it can whisper sweet, adulterous nothings into a lover's ear.

We've all witnessed the power of the tongue to make a person wilt in embarrassment, to bring that "I-wish-I-could-just-sink-into-the-floor" look to the face. Sometimes such criticisms can be veiled as a compliment:

"I'll bet you've finally started dieting! You're looking sooo good!"

"I'm so glad you didn't go out of your way to clean before we came over!"

"You're going to have big shoes to fill, as the new office manager! You probably won't be as good, but thanks for trying."

We've all been in situations where a simple yes or no, or the mere compliance with a request, would have prevented a whole string of other disasters. Whether we're trying to assert our "rights" or trying to impress others, we get into trouble when our words are not friendly and our speech isn't tightly controlled. Not that that's easy to do, either. James makes it clear that the tongue isn't like an animal that can be tamed by a human. Instead, it's **untamable**; a "restless evil filled with deadly poison" (vv. 7-8).

[NOTE 3] Such a statement would seem to provide us with an excuse for the dumb things we say, like we can't help it. Whether we're in an airplane seat, at the water cooler at work, or at home, we know that there are times when things just come out of us in the form of words that don't seem very friendly. But James won't let us get away with that kind of thinking. Indeed, the only way to control the tongue is to monitor what's happening inside us on a deeper level.

James says, for example, that with our tongues we both "bless the Lord and Father" and "curse those who are made in the [image and] likeness of God" (v. 9). What the tongue reveals at that point, it seems, is a kind of double-mindedness that separates people from God. When we are double-minded or, perhaps worse, singularly-minded in our own selfish ways, we have a tendency to dehumanize people and see ourselves as always being in a game in which we have to be the winner. If you believe you deserve more than others or that you are superior to them in some way, you will treat them with contempt. Need I say, that is not living "Jesus' way". **[NOTE 4]**

There's an old adage that says if you really want to know about a person's character, watch how that person treats the waiter at a restaurant. Does he treat this person as a person, or merely as a servant? Kind words aren't meant only for friends. We're to offer them to everyone because they, like us, are made in God's image. You can't bless God and curse someone made in his image at the same time.

The truth is that if we want to have any control over the tongue, we need to pay attention to our inner lives from which either blessing or cursing can come forth. Does the inner spring in our lives gush with both fresh and brackish water? (v. 11). Can a fig tree yield olives? Does salt water spontaneously turn fresh? (v. 12). **No**, what's inside a person determines the kind of fruit that comes out in the form of words and deeds.

[NOTE 5] If we're going to be the kind of people who use words wisely, then we've got to first cultivate an inner life that sees everyone as a friend created in God's image. To do that we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. When we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior the Holy Spirit indwells us, but does not fill us up. It is like a mento in a bottle. Until we add the Coca-Cola it is just in the bottle. But when we add the Coke it fills the bottle and overflows. So it is 100% appropriate to continually pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit as we go through our day. It's how we make sure we are plugged into the power source so that we can bring forth good fruit. We need a vision of life that doesn't put us at the center of the universe, but rather centers on God and God's

purposes. The God who spoke the word of creation and sent the Word to become flesh in his own Son, urges us to choose the kind of words that reflect **His** character, Jesus' life and His model of love.

Alec Baldwin told a CNN reporter that one of the reasons he just had to keep playing Words With Friends on that flight was that it's so "addicting." It was apparently addicting enough that it caused him to use the wrong words with the real people with whom he was flying.

In a world where we use phones for everything but talking to one another, may we recapture the art of using words in a way that reflect the character of the God who dwells within us. Maybe then, "words with friends" can have a whole different meaning.

Sermon Notes for "Friendly Words" based on James 3:1-12
given June 25, 2023 at Doster Community Church

- I. When well-played, thought out, and carefully applied, words can bring great reward. When carelessly applied and reactively generated, words can become weapons that leave both the speaker and the recipient feeling like losers.
- II. Like the bit in the mouth of a horse a controlled tongue can guide a person's life in what he says and does. Metaphors for the tongue include a rudder of a very large ship and a spark that potentially lights a devastating forest fire.
- III. Verses 7-8 could be used as an excuse for the dumb things we say. But James won't let us get away with that. The only way to control the tongue is to monitor what's happening inside us on a deeper level.
- IV. The old adage says if you really want to know about a person's character, watch how they treat the waiter or waitress at a restaurant or how they treat their dog. Kind words are for all.
- V. If we are going to be the kind of people who use words wisely, then we've got to cultivate an inner life that sees everyone as a friend created in God's image.
- VI. What are you going to do about it? Write down one thing that you will do this week to cultivate an inner life that sees everyone as a friend created in God's image. "I will _____".