

Words of Wisdom or Tongues of Fire

James 3:1-12

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

September 12, 2021

Come Holy Spirit and Enkindle within us the fire of your burning Love, in your blessed name we pray.

Amen.

Good Morning!

There are moments when I stand behind a podium, in front of a microphone, particularly after I've ascended the stairs of a grand preaching perch such as this, when I realize that I am about to embody—irony. And so it is today, as I focus my words, and center my preaching on the third chapter of the Book of James. A pastoral Epistle in the Wisdom tradition offered the people of the early church.

The author of James, writes:

“Not many of you should become teachers...for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships, though they are so large...they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire...For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue, a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

“With it we [can] bless the Lord...with it we [can] curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessings and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” James 3:1-10

The author of *James* is writing to offer, as theologian, Martha Moore-Keish says, “Practical guidance on living in community with others...focusing attention on habits of the heart that lead to destructive behavior. Giving particular warnings about harsh speech and against divisions caused by wealth and privilege. (P 14, *Belief Commentary, James*).

As it was then, it is now.

When I was in third grade, I remember sitting around our dining room table. My brother Kevin and I had had a fist fight earlier that afternoon. Each of us was still smarting from our

altercation. My father was mad. I remember him saying something to the effect of, “Really—you’re just going to keep beating each other up?”

My mother chimed in with, “When are you going to grow up?”

My father continued, “You cannot keep doing this. You’re going to have to learn to settle your arguments with words and not punches.”

I sat up. I listened. This was a completely new idea to me. Words. Words. Hmmph. Words, not punches. For better and for worse---I never looked back.

I am sure. I am positive that there were days when my parents completely and utterly regretted that conversation.

Words: Utterances of the tongue, thoughts of the brain spoken aloud, can indeed do as much damage and perhaps even more than individual physical blows. I suspect that I am not the only one who struggles to control what you say. I suspect I’m not the only one who gets herself into much more trouble with what I say, rather than what I do. From reading the book of James it is clear that this is by no means a modern phenomenon.

One of my most favorite psalms, Psalm 39 also speaks to this predicament.

The psalmist writes,

“I said, I will keep watch upon my ways,

So that I do not offend with my tongue.

I will put a muzzle on my mouth,

While the wicked are in my presence,”

So I held my tongue and said nothing;

I refrained from rash words;

But my pain became unbearable.

My heart was hot within me;

While I pondered, the fire burst into flames;

I spoke out with my tongue...” (*Psalm 39: 1-4*)

Make no mistake speaking is a means of doing, what we say can cause actions, what we say can have grave implications for the people and the world around us. Particularly if we are perceived by others to have some power or authority.

As people of faith, in a time where our words may be flung across the world, what we say, what we do matters. This is not to say that we should not speak, we need to, we must. But what we say and what we do need always be guided by the words of the prophet Micah:

What does the Lord require? But to do justice, to love Mercy and to walk humbly with our God. James writes, “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.” James 1:19.

As it was then for the early Christians, may it be now for us.