

Rev. Joan Pell
Sierra Pines United Methodist Church
Sermon: 09/09/2018
Stand-Alone Sermon
Scripture: Proverbs 16:24, James 3:1-12

Food for Life



< Proverbs 16:24 >

Pleasant words are like a **honeycomb**,
sweetness to the soul and **health** to the body.

<James 3:1-12>

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² 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. ³ If we put **bits** into the mouths of **horses** to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴ Or look at **ships**: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small **rudder** wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ 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**! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ For **every species** of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be **tamed** and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a **spring** pour forth from the same opening both **fresh and brackish** water? ¹² Can a **fig tree**, my brothers and sisters, yield **olives**, or a **grapevine** yield **figs**? No more can **salt water** yield **fresh**.



Who likes honey? I remember as a child in England having honey sandwiches. *Was that a thing in the US?* Nowadays, we tend to use honey in baking and in deserts, and as a sweetener in tea and other drinks. It is good for medicinal purposes such as sore throats and coughs. And some claim that local honey can be useful for treating seasonal allergies.

Proverbs 16:24 that we heard earlier compares our words to a honeycomb.

Pleasant words are like a **honeycomb**, **sweetness** to the soul and **health** to the body. Pleasant words that are spoken to us, just like honey, can be words that make us feel good, that bring us health.



There is an acronym that has been popular for a few years. T.H.I.N.K or THINK. Is it thoughtful? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

Pleasant words can build us up and nourish us but hurtful words can tear us down and destroy our souls. The words that we speak and hear **feed** us and can be life-giving or life-destroying.



There is an old saying, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but **words** will never hurt me.” or perhaps you know it as “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” I remember chanting it back in elementary school to a bully on the playground when he called me by a derogatory name. It was supposed to indicate that I would not let his name-calling get to me; that I would ignore the taunt and not retaliate. And perhaps there is some truth in this saying as it did empower me and help to build my resilience somewhat.

But really, we all know words can hurt. There’s a poem by *Barrie Wade* that goes like this:

*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can also hurt me.
Stones and sticks break only skin, while words are ghosts that haunt me.
Slant and curved the word-swords fall to pierce and stick inside me.
Bats and bricks may ache through bones but words can mortify me.
Pain from words has left its scar on mind and heart that's tender.
Cuts and bruises now have healed; it's words that I remember.¹*

There’s another saying by an unknown author that I came across this week:

*The tongue has no bones, but it is strong enough to break a heart.
So be careful with your words.²*



Words have power. Words are like **food** – they nourish us into health. What is your word diet like? Jesus said in Matthew 15:18 - *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.*

The writer James knew this too. In today’s scripture, James clearly thinks of words as having great power to destroy. James begins by saying that not many people should become teachers. Teachers will be judged more harshly than anyone else as they have influence over a large group of people who could be easily led astray. You can imagine how comfortable that makes me feel standing up here and preaching right now! It is

¹ <https://www.quora.com/What-do-you-think-about-the-saying-sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones-but-words-will-never-hurt-me> and

<http://www.edu.pe.ca/vrcs/resources/poetry/text/poems/what's%20fair/truth.html>

² <http://www.wisdomquotesandstories.com/tongue-strong-enough-break-heart/>

hard to imagine a teacher or preacher that never once misspoke, that never once chose an unfortunate word or phrase! The weight of this job is sometimes overwhelming. But just before you feel too smug, there is a sense in which all of us are teachers, with influence over many lives.



James continues his discussion by turning to two metaphors: a horse's bit and a ship's rudder. He makes a similar point for each of these. Both of these very small items can change the direction of something that is very large. James is saying that the tongue too controls the direction of a person.

What does it mean to think of our tongues and the words that we speak controlling our whole self? Or even the words that we write? Perhaps, in today's vernacular, what does it mean to think of one's entire self being controlled by what we post on social media? Our words, spoken or digital, affect our lives, both in the wider society and within the community of faith.



James' next metaphor says that a whole forest can be set alight by a small fire. And this summer, this week even, we are well aware of that: The North Fire, Sliger Fire, Delta Fire all started this week. Our tongues, our words, spoken or written, can destroy not just one other person, but can spread to others and destroy our churches and our communities.



Gossip is one type of speech that does untold damage. And it is so easy to fall into that trap. One of the things that I have learned to do is to ask people, what part of this conversation can I share and how much of it is confidential? And if I forget to ask, then I assume it is all confidential. And if we are not careful, then our

Prayer Time in our worship service where we share our joys and concerns can be like that too. We need to make sure that we have permission to share the details. Its okay to say, "My friend needs prayer," without naming the friend or the specifics.



There is another type of speech that can destroy communities and that is hate speech. Wikipedia's definition is that "Hate speech is speech that attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity."³ Most forms of Hate speech

are protected in this country under the 1st amendment right to free speech. Aside from being UnChristian, hate speech can incite others to violence.

But speech that destroys doesn't have to something that we would call hate speech. It can be more innocuous than that. With the advent of social media, it is really easy to share with our friends' articles that we have read without even checking if they are true

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hate_speech



or not. And then we get the spread of misinformation and we are not quite sure what is true and what is not because we have heard it so many times.

Back in 2010, the Dr. Oz Show tackled the topic of exposure to radiation from various sources and recommended that patients request the use of a thyroid guard during dental x-ray procedures to minimize the possibilities of thyroid cancer. However, as others (such as Dr. Wendy Harpham) have cautioned, the use of a thyroid guard is not appropriate in all x-ray situations.⁴ Eight years later, for some reason it has come to light again. I saw messages at least 6 times this week that said to request a thyroid guard for dental x-rays and mammograms. And so, the fires start. Now some fires can be good. And maybe it is good advice to ask your dentist or technician whether a thyroid guard is appropriate in your particular case.

Other fires though are not good. Racist speech is never good. Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League have reported that anti-Semitic incidents in general have soared to their highest levels in two decades in the U.S. over the last couple of years.⁵ Teacher, Jennifer Goss, designed a course on the Holocaust and other genocides in world history at Robert E. Lee High School in Staunton, Va., where many of her students are white. Goss has taught her course for nearly 15 years, but she said interest has grown among her students, as well as her fellow teachers in recent years...She said, "Initially when I started teaching the class I was using examples of anti-Semitic graffiti that were from 10 years ago, And sadly, I can go onto most major news outlets today and find examples from just a couple of weeks ago."⁶

Our African American sisters and brothers have been speaking up and speaking out against the various forms of racist speech and actions that they encounter daily. Colin Kaepernick has been kneeling during the national anthem before NFL games. This has cost him his career. And almost everyone has something to say about it whether in favor or against. This week we saw Colin Kaepernick become the face of Nike's "Just Do It" 30th anniversary campaign. The advertisement spread quickly, like wildfire, and those who were upset immediately started burning their shoes.



A whole forest can be set alight by a small fire. Sometimes fire can be healthy for us, and other times not. Our words have power. Our actions have power. They can heal, or they can injure. Ultimately James calls on us to examine ourselves closely -- an examination focusing largely on the words that come out of our mouths -- and determine who we truly are. Perhaps we can control that unruly tongue, after all. But to do so will require constant attention to who we are and what God has made us to be.

⁴ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/thyroid-guards/>

⁵ <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/hate-in-schools.html> (published August 6, 2018).

⁶ Ibid.

A popular wise quote from Dutch Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen goes like this: “Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone’s face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions.”⁷

James advises us to tame our tongues. Our words ought to be healing words; they ought to bring grace and peace; they should build up and not tear down, heal rather than kill, encourage rather than discourage. Then we can truly join the Psalmist in praying, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14).⁸

Thanks be to God,
Amen.

Let us pray...

God of justice and love, may your words be a lamp for our path. All too often, we mis-speak and hurt others. Forgive us for our thoughtlessness and the injuries that we have caused. May each person here know how precious they are in your sight despite whatever words have seeped into their souls from the careless speech of another. Help us to guard our tongues and to remember that our words feed ourselves and our neighbors and we can deeply wound each other. May we know when to speak up and when to be silent; when to amplify the voice of another and when to speak out for justice and peace or act in protest. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Resources

Aymer, Margaret. “Commentary on James 3:1-12” in *Working Preacher Blog*. St Paul, Mn: Luther Seminary, September 16, 2018.

⁷ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henri_nouwen_588351

⁸ <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2009/09/healing-words-prov-120-33-ps.html>