

“Speech Matters”
James 3:1-12
Andrew Foster Connors
15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 13, 2015

“Not many of you should become teachers,” James says on the day that all of our volunteer Sunday School teachers go back to work. It’s too late, teachers, you’re committed. “We who teach will be judged with greater strictness,” James says, which is surprising to hear in our culture. *We* treat teaching like no big deal. We pay starting teachers, on average \$13,000 less than computer programmers, \$14,000 less than accountants, \$15,000 less than registered nurses and the gap only grows with more experience.¹ Our culture values teaching a lot less than James values it.

The church is a little odd in that regard. Several years ago the Presbyterian Church changed the official title of pastors like me from Ministers of Word and Sacrament back to the earlier language of “teaching elders,” emphasizing the teaching office of the church. To people outside of the church “teaching elder” sounded like a demotion. But not to Presbyterians.

Presbyterians have been educators for the entirety of our theological existence. John Calvin, our 16th century ancestor most responsible for defining our branch of the Christian family, setup the first public school system anywhere in the world in Geneva, Switzerland. To know Christ, he reasoned, you don’t need a priest or anyone else telling you what to believe. You need to know words of scripture which point to Christ. And to know scripture you have to know how to read.

Speech matters – from the 95 theses that Martin Luther nailed to a church door igniting the Reformation, to the 140 characters that people post on Twitter today. Our speech can move people to soaring heights, unleash movements for global change, and transform lives in the process. Speech can also incite violence, fan prejudice and hate, and wound people so deeply that they choose to exit this world rather than face a bullying kind of shame.

Speech can be used for good and evil, James warns. Church folk know this as well as anyone else. How many of us have been wounded by a word from the pulpit, or alternatively, transformed by it? How many of us have been hurt by words leveled in the midst of a church family fight, or felt carried through a storm by the comforting words of “I’m here for you?” How many of us have said things we regretted or regretted not saying words we should have spoken? Speech matters which is why I don’t think the teaching James is warning about is limited to those

¹ <http://www.nea.org/home/12661.htm>

with teaching certificates or those who stand at the front of the classroom. James has in mind anyone who uses speech to influence others - which implicates all of us to varying degrees – the parent teaching his child by example, the politician teaching the public by what she says, the clerk and the customer interacting with each other in the marketplace. Speech matters, which is why James sends up such a strong warning. “We who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

You don’t have to look far to see just why James is so concerned. Read some of the anonymous comments on Baltimore news websites. “The city is done,” one person wrote. “The more blacks they allow to lead the worse it will get.” So much for our post-racist society. Meanwhile, Donald Trump chastised General Colin Power for supporting the black lives matter movement. “He’s wrong,” Trump said. “He’s totally wrong. It should be ‘all lives matter.’” Trump, like so many white people, refuses to recognize that saying “black lives matter” is not the same thing as saying “only black lives matter.” It is a concise way of acknowledging the historic and ongoing devaluing of black lives against the moral creeds of our nation. It is a concise way of acknowledging that all lives haven’t mattered and still don’t matter the way they should. Trump made his comment on the same day that the NY Police Department released a video of the mistaken arrest of bi-racial tennis star James Blake who was misidentified as a suspect in a fraudulent credit card ring, and body-slammed to the ground while standing outside a hotel in NY.

I’m a big believer in rhetoric when that rhetoric is faithful to the God’s Word. It has the power to lift people up out of the valleys we all encounter in our lives. It has the power to state truths publicly in times and spaces where the truth is hard to state. It has the power to inspire us all to imagine a world before it exists and then rally our blood, sweat and tears to birth that world into being. I’m a big believer in the power of speech when it’s faithful to God.

Presbyterians have been historically strong in this endeavor. Some of the earliest protestors of slavery in America were not the founding fathers of our nation, but teachers of the gospel.

“Can it be believed that a people contending for liberty should, at the same time, be promoting and supporting slavery?” said Presbyterian minister Jacob Green in 1789. “What foreign nation can believe that we who so loudly complain of Britain’s attempts to oppress and enslave us are, at the same time, voluntarily holding multitudes of fellow creatures in abject slavery, and that while we are abundantly declaring that we esteem liberty the greatest of all earthly blessings?”²

Speech is power. The power of words is the power to create new worlds of possibilities. It’s the power to rally fellow human beings to the cause of justice. It’s the power to call to account those who participate in injustice. Which is why James spends so much time warning the church to choose carefully the words that we speak.

Choose carefully the words that we use when describing brothers and sisters of cultures, or races, or nations different from our own. Choose carefully the words

² Rev. Jacob Green, Sermon preached April 22, 1778, Hanover New Jersey. Online excerpt - <http://americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/rebellion/text6/slaveryrights.pdf>.

that we use when we summon likeminded people to a cause for which we believe. Choose carefully the words that we use when we speak about others not immediately in our. Choose carefully the words that we put in that text or message about a classmate or rival. Choose carefully the words that we use.

Because James knows that, at least for Christians, words change things. They lead people somewhere. That's their intent. "Do not merely listen to the word" James says toward the beginning of this book, "Do what it says." "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." (1:22-24) For James, speech is always intended to change us or our world, to shape us and our world, to open new possibilities and draw us into them.

And maybe in these fearful times – fear between races, fear between nations, fear between civilians and police – maybe the best gift the church can give the culture is reclaiming the sacred gift of speech – that power that we are invited to use to bless our God, to bless those who are made in the likeness of God, to bless our neighbor. Maybe the best gift the church can give the culture is refusing to give in, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, to *gossip, false advertising, propaganda, and ideology*, all forces that serve to mis-describe reality," leaving us, Brueggemann says, with "promises that cannot be kept, desires that cannot be satisfied, and fears that cannot be assuaged;" with a diminished politics that serves "predatory interests."³ Maybe the gift that we can give our city is refusing to allow our speech to be cheapened, stripped of its relational truth that leads to community, and justice, and healing consistent with God's hopes. Maybe the gift we can give our church is learning our speech from scripture and each other instead of the diminished speech of our current political campaigns. To use our speech to heal and to hope instead of to hurt and to hate.

That's not easy to do. Two weeks ago residents from all 9 police districts who are leaders in BUILD - sat down with the commanders of all 9 police districts, along with the Commissioner and other top brass. Going into this meeting 95% of the residents we had listened to in the last several weeks had stated unequivocally that they were more afraid of the police in their neighborhood than the criminal element. This is at time when the murder rate was larger than it had been in several decades. One young man had put it this way – "I know how to stay away from people causing trouble on the street, but the police can put something on me and ruin my life." How in the world could a meeting ever make a dent in that enormous mountain of mistrust?

We opened the meeting with one-on-one conversations between each resident and the commander of the district where that resident lives. The resident asked the commander, "What's it been like for you to be a police officer in Baltimore the last several months?" And the officer asked the resident, "what's it been like for you in the neighborhood the last several months?" By the end of two hours, I marveled not because we were talking about real ways to address the national

³ Walter Brueggemann, "Free Speech: A License to Destroy or a Responsibility to Build Up," <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/free-speech-a-license-to-destroy-or-a-responsibility-to-build-up-james-31-12/>

problem of police/community distrust, or devising strategies to attack the deep connection between the war on drugs and the poverty and racism in our nation. I marveled that we were having the discussion face to face, person to person, police to resident, resident to police. Careful speech – honest speech – had opened up a new world of possibility for everyone. Admittedly it was a small step, but small steps are always at the beginning of giant leaps of change. Or should I say, careful speech, honest speech - which seems so small and insignificant - always precedes God's new creation.

Speech matters. As the church year starts, how will you use yours? Will you use it to bless your neighbors or distance yourself from them? Will you use it to speak a word of forgiveness in that broken relationship or lob another grenade? Will you use it to share with a trusted friend what's really going on deep in your heart and soul or to isolate yourself even more with our rote liturgies of "I'm fine."? Will you use it speak new worlds into being or to add to its further destruction?

Speech matters. How will you use yours?