

“Watch Your Mouth”
James 3:1-12
Rev. Andrew Connors
Proper 19
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“Watch your mouth,” my mother said. “If you speak like that again, I’ll wash it out with soap.” Nevertheless, round about age 13, I persisted. I had been used to the smell of Ivory soap for most of my childhood. But the taste was tough to get out of your mouth. It was a very good deterrent at the time, reserved mostly for curse words which were prohibited in my household growing up. And while I can’t say that parental opposition to cursing stuck, the need to watch your mouth has never left me.

The writer of James believed that what comes out of our mouths can heal and can wound and that has certainly been my experience in the church. “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never harm me” is one of the biggest lies ever perpetrated to children and we should know this as people of the book. God speaks the world into being. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Words are at the heart of our life together as a people.

Words also start wars, legitimize violence, stoke hate and division. What we say matters deeply. James says that out of the same mouth come blessings and curses but I don’t think we should take this to mean that some of us always speak one or the other. More often than not I see blessings and curses intertwined with one another, tangled up in ways that require critical reflection.

Like many of you I’ve been reflecting on 20 years since 9/11. Since I was ordained on September 23, 2001, not quite 2 weeks after that dreaded day, my entire ordained ministry has taken place in the shadow of war. What has struck me about American leadership during that time is the way in which truth is so often mixed with misinformation and untruth.

President Bush spoke to the nation from the pulpit of the National Cathedral on September 14, 2001. His speech and the entire service were a mixture of spiritual guidance sorely needed as Americans grieved and political positioning toward retaliation and eventual war. It was a dangerous mix. Yet I remember how difficult it was at the time to offer anything like critical reflection as we all sought unity in grief and the hope that the world really could come together for peace. So it’s interesting to reflect 20 years later on how those words strike us today. On September 14, President Bush named a lot of things that were absolutely true.

“We come before God to pray for the missing and the dead, and for those who loved them. On Tuesday, our country was attacked with deliberate and massive cruelty. We have seen the images of fire and ashes and bent steel. Now come the names, the

list of casualties we are only beginning to read: They are the names of men and women who began their day at a desk or in an airport, busy with life. They are the names of people who faced death and in their last moments called home to say, be brave and I love you. They are the names of passengers who defied their murderers and prevented the murder of others on the ground. They are the names of men and women who wore the uniform of the United States and died at their posts. They are the names of rescuers -- the ones whom death found running up the stairs and into the fires to help others.”

“We will read all these names,” the President said. “We will linger over them and learn their stories, and many Americans will weep.”¹

Everything the President said to that point in his speech was true. The massive grief, the deliberate cruelty of those terrible terrorist acts. The heroism and love shown by so many fellow citizens on that day.

And then came misleading words that demand reflection. “Just three days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history, but our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” America charged with ridding the world of evil? That near religious zeal sounded almost as dangerous as the underlying ethics of the terrorists who flew into the towers. “This nation is peaceful,” the President went on, “but fierce when stirred to anger.”² But we know from our own history that this nation has those who love peace and those who have lynched our fellow citizens. This nation has supported democratic movements across the globe and overthrown democratically elected governments in Central America when they didn’t suit our economic interests. This nation has supported freedom of speech and freedom to practice your religion and freedom of the press to write what they see. And our country has incarcerated more of its own citizens - disproportionately citizens of color - than most other nations in the world. We are sometimes peaceful and sometimes not.

But again, before President Bush finished his speech he uttered more truth. “We see our national character in rescuers working past exhaustion, in long lines of blood donors, in thousands of citizens who have asked to work and serve in any way possible.” True. “And we have seen our national character in eloquent acts of sacrifice:

Inside the World Trade Center, one man who could have saved himself stayed until the end and at the side of his quadriplegic friend.” True. “A beloved priest died giving the last rites to a firefighter.” True. “Two office workers, finding a disabled stranger, carried her down 68 floors to safety.” True. “A group of men drove through the night from Dallas to Washington to bring skin grafts for burned victims.” True.

¹ President George W. Bush, “Remarks at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance Service,” September 14, 2021,

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911prayer&memorialaddress.htm>

² Ibid.

And then more bending of the truth. “America is a nation full of good fortune, with so much to be grateful for, but we are not spared from suffering. In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender, and the commitment of our Fathers is now the calling of our time.”³

No critic of American policy or power than I know has ever lashed out at America because “we are freedom’s home and defender.” They have criticized or protested, or turned to violence because we sometimes are the world’s bully. Reaping what we did not sow. Overpromising what miracles our military can achieve. Refusing to face the truth of our own history in all of its valor and its victimization with humility and a heart for the truth.

And we will only ever get to the root of our problems by being honest about our history alongside the truth of the heroism that we saw displayed in the days, months, and years after 9/11. What comes out of our mouths is more important than ever.

Unfortunately, we can all be as dualistic in our language as the people we oppose. So things like “capitalism” or every single Republican idea or entire states in the nation are “all bad.” Our imprecision is its own kind of lying. And it makes any kind of relationship with any sort of enemy impossible, which is what the Bush war machine achieved at the beginning of the post 9/11 world and what we’ve been trying to overcome ever since.

And yet if we’re honest, we’ll see there’s no way to save the planet without working with people we’ve written off as enemies. There’s no way to reshape our nation’s racist policies without engaging people who don’t currently see antiracism in their interest. Apparently, we’re now being told that there’s no way to stop a terrorist organization in Afghanistan without working with the Taliban which, if true, means that enemies can be temporary things.⁴

William Sloane Coffin said “there are 3 kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country.”⁵ Coffin reminds us that when we’re talking about human beings we can’t afford to accept anything less than a love of neighbor that recognizes our mixed natures - our penchant for blessings and curses wrapped up in one.

I think this is what James saw early in the church in a small but important way long before Christian faith got so intertwined with civil power. Watch your mouth, James admonished, because cursing anyone who is made in the image of God is condemning a gift from God. It is failing to acknowledge that every human being no matter how

³ Ibid.

⁴ Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, “Pentagon Leaders Wary of Working with Taliban,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/01/us/politics/taliban.html>. See also Max Fisher “The New U.S. Challenge in Afghanistan: Coping With Taliban Rule,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/world/asia/taliban-usa.html>.

⁵ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2004, p.84.

misguided, no matter how full of hate, no matter how wrong, is made in God's image and therefore not to be written off by other human beings. Writing people off is the first step on the way toward violence and as Dr. King tried to tell us so many times, violence creates more problems than it solves. We should never be surprised about that during or after a war. We should remember it always before we are pulled into them.

Words matter. We can practice that kind of communication in the community of the church. Speaking words to one another that seek the truth in our assessment of the world and ourselves. Disagreeing with one another in ways that honor the divine spark in each other especially when we disagree. Differentiating between words offered to wound and those offered out of honesty and a desire to create the possibility for healing for everyone. Challenging each other to resist the dualistic impulses of our ongoing post-9/11 world, which make some people out to be always good and others always bad; striving instead for our words to match our deepest conviction that all human beings are gifts from God.

We can practice that kind of communication in the community of the church so that we can be ready to share it with the world, challenging the us vs. them language that has grown like a cancer since 9/11. Challenging any language that seeks to make one group of human beings out to be less than children of God. Challenging the words that we use to divide us from each other when we judge people we support only by their best traits and judge people we oppose only by their worst. Challenging the arrangements of the world that have grown out of those divisive words and limited what we can accomplish as one people sharing an earth that we did not create and do not own.

And even when that kind of practice doesn't make it deep into our world, still it matters. Someone said to me this week, how is it that you don't seem to lose hope? Despite the setbacks in our city, despite the systemic issues that we don't seem to address in our world, despite the death all around. Despite the weariness that COVID has wrought in our lives, in the world. How is it that you don't seem to lose hope? Honestly, I had to think carefully about my answer to avoid some kind of imprecise language that might offer something about God that sounds glib, superficial, or less than the truth. What came to mind is watching people I know or see in the world going deeper in their own callings. It is observing so many volunteers raise a hand to say "I want to support Afghani refugees." It is watching so many of you give your lives toward healing and helping others in your work and with your volunteer time. It is noticing parents of young children attentively reorganizing your entire work and personal lives to make sure that you give your kids the love and attention they deserve while the world is upside down. It is seeing you march, and write, and struggle for a fairer world. And it is watching leaders inside and outside of the congregation bring your best selves into loving each other through loss, and heartache, and illness, and hurt - the hardest parts

of life. Acts of faith that always start out as words about love and grace and giving and healing and justice.

It is God's love lived out however imperfectly in concrete acts of giving, organizing, and speaking that brings me hope. I hope for you this year, it can bring the same.