

September 16, 2018

“Rules of Engagement: No Playing With Matches”

James 3:1-12 (in The Message)

D.J. Lombardo grew up across the street from me. I don't remember playing with him much after 8 or 9 years of age. That means I was pretty young when the two of us decided to play with matches on the side of his house. I can't tell you exactly what we thought would happen. I don't remember bringing a hose or bucket of water over in the event we needed to put something out. I just remember lighting those dry weeds on fire and quickly panicking when it started to spread up the hill toward their neighbors. Luckily, we took care of it pretty fast. But it could have gone terribly wrong. Two little boys with a pack of matches can do a lot of damage. Think of all the tragic fires of the last couple years in Colorado, California, and Montana. So much devastation resulting from a tossed cigarette butt, or careless campfire!

When it comes to life together in the Body of Christ (the Church), James makes it clear that some behaviors and attitudes are incongruent with the Gospel – and do serious harm to others. How we act, honor people, and even what comes out of our mouths . . . it all matters; and it can decimate the landscape of individual lives and entire churches.

Bits and horses, ships and rudders, matches and fire are creative ways James illustrates what we all know, but constantly need to be reminded of: our words matter; **words have weight**. And this isn't just what James says; the Bible is full of passages addressing what comes out of our mouths. Two of the Ten Commandments deal with how we talk: about God and the truth. Jesus talks about what we say. “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks . . . I tell you that people will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.” (Matthew 12:34b, 36) A little later He says, “What goes into a person's mouth does not make him/her unclean, but what comes out of their mouths, that is what makes them unclean.” (Matthew 15:11) The Book of Proverbs may have the highest concentration of sayings related to our speech. Gossip is constantly on Paul's lists of sins in his various letters. **The Bible has A LOT to say about what comes out of our mouth; and for good reason. A LOT of what comes out of our mouths does A LOT of damage.**

Can you think of something someone said that hurt you or someone else? Is there something you said that torched someone's soul?

Since it's 2018, can we also add texting, tweeting, snap chatting, and emailing to the ways we 'speak' to others? And can we acknowledge that it's just too easy to text or post a snarky comment when we're not face-to-face? We don't even need to check for typos, correct spelling, or proper grammar. Just slap it together and send it. With emojis, you don't even need to use words 😊

Do you think it was harder to trash talk someone using telegraphs; smoke signals?

We've got to slow down and think through what comes out of our mouths or smart phones. Janet's acronym with the kids would be a good thing to remember. [THINK. Is it True, Helpful, Inspiring, Necessary, Kind?] Earlier in James' letter he says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." (James 1:19) We know this, but we need to constantly invite God to help this happen in our everyday lives. Here's a prayer for us to pray from the Psalms: "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips." (Psalm 141:3) And my thumbs.

We say "count to ten" for good reason; or "put it in your draft box before you send it." This week, let's choose to listen more carefully and take more time to respond. I'm not saying we should overthink everything or keep all of our feelings to ourselves. I'm suggesting that we all become more thoughtful and reflective in our choice of words, tone of voice, body language, etc.

Most biblical scholars are quick to point out that James has more in mind than 'cleaning up our language;' and that he's mostly focusing on church leaders who teach. "Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. **We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths.**" (James 3:1-2 in The Message) Another reason to make this sermon short.

Why might James single out church leaders who are teaching? Because words have weight! And a church leader's words tend to carry even more weight. And a church leader's words about God and His will are heavier still.

Was there something you were taught about God growing up that created distance between you and God – or you and others?

James is concerned that church teachers are leading the people astray both in word and deed. Last week Jason addressed James' concern that leaders were showing favoritism to those with means and influence – which is totally incongruent with the Good News. On the actual teaching front, it's pretty clear James is addressing the "anti-law" sentiments that were creeping into the church. The thinking went that, 'if we're saved by faith alone, then God's law and our compliance to it isn't important or necessary.' This kind of teaching was leading people off the rails. What we teach matters!

This doesn't mean everyone who teaches in the Church needs a seminary degree. Trust me, there's A LOT we ordained Presbyterian ministers don't have a clue about. But solid, biblical teaching – teaching that takes the whole redemptive story of God and His people into account; teaching that does not shy away from the “grace and truth” fully found in Jesus Christ; teaching that is consistent with the big picture and doesn't go down petty little rabbit trails – [solid, biblical teaching connected to historic Christianity] sets people in the right direction, blesses them to be a blessing, makes a person confident of his/her standing as a son/daughter of God, and leads to a transformed life. Leaders must teach biblically, intentionally, and seriously, without taking ourselves too seriously.

We're calling this sermon series “Rules of Engagement.” For me, engaging is a positive word. James can come across more negatively about the damage our speech and teaching can have – and with good reason. But I like Peterson's translation because it acknowledges/infers the power of leaders and others to do good with our words. “A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything . . . . . or destroy it.” (James 3:5a in The Message)

We know the damage and destruction our words can cause. We actually don't need a creative metaphor or illustration to convince us of that harsh reality, do we? But let's think about the “nearly anything” in a more positive light for a moment. Let's think about the many ways our words and tweets and letters and emails can encourage, evoke joy, point people to beauty, and bring glory to the One who redeems hearts and minds and words.

Let's remember that God is in the business of redeeming us; which includes the redemption of our tongues.

Let's remember the Book of Acts (chapter 2) tells the story of “tongues of fire” that descended on the disciples and led to an articulation of Good News that gripped people's hearts and minds, and started a revolution.

Let's remember that our Skilled Captain knows how to direct these little rudders so people can hear what it means to sail on magnificent seas; that He uses bits in our mouths to direct us and others on grand and glorious adventures.

And let's remember that if God tells us to play with matches, it will be because we are called to be “the light of the world.”

May God use us – and our words – to light a thousand candles that never burn out, bring clarity to every area of our lives, and light the way for others.