

Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2009 James 3:1-12

Early this past summer, Kathy and I had the pleasure of hosting my younger brother Marc, his wife Sofia and their son Zach for a brief visit. It was the first time they had come to see us since we moved here a dozen years ago, and it was great to have the opportunity to show them around. We spent a day in Washington, D.C., looking around the Smithsonian museums – especially the museum of natural history, because my brother is a high school science teacher. And we also spent a day touring the battlefield at Gettysburg, which was something my nephew had really looked forward to, since he is a bit of a military history buff and one of our ancestors fought there.

The day at Gettysburg was enjoyable, but it might have been even better. I've spent considerable time studying the battle and have spent a lot of time getting to know the battlefield. I'd never claim to know as much as a licensed battlefield guide, but I know the basics and several special stories. Unfortunately, I didn't get to share much of what I knew. My nephew, you see, suffers from logorrhea. Don't worry, it isn't serious, just annoying – it means “excessive talking.” He talked and talked and talked and talked.

Now, I understand that he was trying to impress his uncle with what he knew, and he knew a lot – though some of what he “knew” was wrong. But because he was talking so much, he missed out on the chance to know more at the end of the day than he had at the beginning. As he went on and on and on, I found myself thinking, “Zach, when you do all the talking, you're not learning anything – and neither am I.”

I didn't say it, but I still wonder whether I should have. On the one hand, I didn't want to crush his spirit. On the other hand, it might have helped him realize that you don't always have to show what you know, that sometimes silence is the better choice. And there probably was a better way for me to make that point.

I've made my living for twenty-five years by putting words together, but I still don't always know exactly what to say. Words are powerful – both those we say, and those we choose not to say. As we read in the book of Proverbs, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” Of course, then there are words not fitly spoken, ill chosen, poorly considered, hurtful.

Many times in life we find ourselves thinking, “Gee, I wish I hadn't

said that.” We all speak too impulsively at times, without thinking through how our words will be received. I don’t know anyone who hasn’t lived to regret something they’ve said.

But the most tragic story of regret I ever heard comes from near the end of the Vietnam War. The phone rang in a suburban Boston home. The woman of the house answered and she heard a young man’s voice say, “Hello, Mom?” It was her son, just returned from the war. “Mom,” he said, “I’m calling from California.”

“Son,” she said with delight, “you weren’t supposed to be discharged this soon. When are you coming home?”

“Soon, Mom, soon,” he answered. “But I want to bring a friend with me. You see, he was badly wounded. He lost an arm and he’s disfigured, and . . . Mom . . . he doesn’t have anywhere else to go. I want him to live with us, as a part of our family.”

The mother stammered at first. “Well, son, I . . . I . . . I just don’t know. We don’t have much room, and . . . and I’m sure the army has some kind of place for him. I think I’d rather you just came home by yourself.”

A few hours later the phone rang again. It was a police officer in California. “Ma’am,” the officer said, “we have a young man here and his I.D. says he’s your son. He’s disfigured, only one arm, and ma’am, I’m sorry to have to tell you that your son has just taken his own life.”

How that mother must have wished she could have taken back the words she had spoken. How she must have wished she could go back in time and say, “Sure, son, bring your friend home. We’ll give it a try.” How she came to regret the words that she did say, words that had an effect she never could have anticipated. She didn’t know. It wasn’t her fault. But I’m sure she blamed herself for what she said, and for what she didn’t say.

Words: they can do so much harm, so much more than we imagine or intend. It’s frightening, really. In our scripture today, James reminds us of the tremendous power of the spoken word. He speaks of the human tongue as a spark, seemingly small, but capable of igniting a huge blaze that destroys everything in sight for miles and miles and miles.

The author of the letter of James lived in a time when there was a much greater appreciation for the power of the spoken word. Today, words that really matter get written down or otherwise recorded, but people say all kinds of things which few take especially seriously. In the New Testament period, however, the vast majority of people could neither read nor write, so the spoken word was taken very seriously. Spoken promises were contracts. Spoken statements could bestow great honor or cause great shame. People remembered what others said, and passed it on. Spoken words could cause wars or create peace.

Both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures of the first century agreed that words and speech contained power and peril in ample supply. From the wisdom literature of Egypt to the writings of Plutarch and Seneca to the wisdom traditions in the Bible, ancient sages believed that silence was better than speech, that listening and not speaking was the pathway to wisdom and that people should speak very carefully, never expressing rage or envy. James, obviously, shared this opinion. The tongue is a small part of the body, says James, but like the rudder on a ship or a bridle on a horse, the tongue can steer us either into the path of wisdom or toward destruction. It takes only a spark — a misplaced, unkind or untrue word — to burn down a community that has been nurtured and established like an old-growth forest. The tongue’s “deadly poison” is always just a word or two away from infecting a whole group. The power of words to both bless and curse is a power not to be taken lightly, particularly when our words are directed at God or at people who are created in God’s image.

Many of us are aware of the tragic wildfire sweeping over a large stretch of southern California. As of this past week, it had already consumed over 160,000 acres, which is more than 250 square miles. It also has cost the life of two fire fighters whose vehicle overturned as they tried to escape the flames. The property damage is in the hundreds of millions and the state of California has already poured another \$43 million into fighting the fire. All this was caused by someone who lit a match or a lighter, someone who first produced a tiny flame.

James wants us to remember that a single word or sentence can have the same kind of widespread effect. A small insult can provoke retaliation, which leads to outrage, then bitterness, brokenness and perhaps a feud. Soon, those on each side are demanding that everyone else take sides – if you aren’t with me, you’re against me – and the next thing you know, that one small insult has engulfed an entire community in animosity. Does it always happen? No. But it always can happen. Words are that powerful.

It is enough to make a person want to fall completely silent. But utter silence isn’t the solution, because then we forfeit the positive power of words, words that bless, words that inspire, words that make possible reconciliation. Even casual remarks can heal and strengthen.

Richard Allen Farmer, who used to teach at Gordon College and now lives in Grand Prairie, Texas, tells the following story: “When I was a youngster, probably in my tenth or eleventh year, my grandparents bought us a small plastic cartoon projector as a Christmas present. Bringing a couple of reels of black and white cartoons, Grandpa taught me how to thread the projector. He patiently demonstrated how to bend the film

around the sprockets and thread it into the take-up reel. After one demonstration, Grandpa said, "Now you try it." I threaded the projector correctly and I will never forget his words: 'I have the smartest grandson in the world!'

"Years later I asked Grandpa if he remembered that incident. He didn't, but I did. For all the years following that day until now, I have thought I was bright, skillful, teachable, quick to catch on." What a difference, for the better, a few words made.

So it is important for us to choose and use our words well, mindful of the power in them. But that isn't all I want you to take away from today's message. I also want you to remember some words from long ago. Remember the beginning of John's gospel? It says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The gospel goes on to reveal that the Word was Jesus Christ, and what God said through the Word was that we are all loved and wanted. God said, "I love the world so much, I am sending my only begotten Son." God's Word says we matter, that we are worth God's own sacrifice. We matter that much to the maker and ruler of all there is.

This morning, I want you to take what God has said about you to heart. I know other people have said other things. They've said hurtful things. They've said you're not good enough or smart enough or good looking enough. They've said that you're a failure, that you'll never succeed. They've said that you aren't worth the trouble. They've said all sorts of terrible things.

But God has said, "You're special. I love you. You're important. And you don't have to be anything more than you are for me to love you." Listen to those words. Believe those words. Live those words.

Amen