

“Sticks and Stones”  
Sermon September 16, 2018  
Rev. Anita Peebles

Well, I can honestly not recommend preaching after this Scripture passage. Talk about pressure! “My brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly. We all make mistakes often, but those who don’t make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity...Think about this: a small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us...” whew! That’s a lot to chew on. And, indeed, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her addition to the *Feasting on the Word* biblical commentary for this Sunday, “preachers wise enough to know that they preach chiefly to themselves will spend some time praying this passage before attempting to interpret it to their congregations.”

And yes, Barbara Brown Taylor, or BBT, as I affectionately call her, is right. I get it: teachers have to be careful because they are raising the next generation of humans to think for themselves, to hopefully grow into being compassionate and active advocates for themselves and others in this world. An effective teacher is one whose words and lessons stay with you as you grow, whose influence continues to empower you to be your best self long after you’ve left their classroom. For me, those people are Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Carl, Mrs. Fuller, Mr. Rupp, Mr. Gumbrecht, Ms. Wieland, Mr. Baker, Nancy Boutilier, David Kamitsuka, Cindy Chapman, Victor Judge, Viki Matson and Dale Andrews, may he rest in peace and justice. All of these people have been examples of the teachers who saw in me a young person with promise, and dedicated their time and energy and heart to empowering me to think for myself, speak truth in love, and show up to advocate for others. These teachers help me understand the part of the Greco-Roman worldview in which the author of James writes that held teachers in the highest esteem. Teachers were praised for their intellect and ability to construct coherent arguments and their ways of deftly communicating true wisdom to those who learn at their feet.

But the letter of James, while upholding the idea that teachers are one of the highest goods, consonant with their first-century context and sociopolitical position, is a letter thick with warnings for those who occupy

positions of influence. A writer in the *Preaching God's Transformative Justice* commentary puts it this way: "authority is a breeding ground for sin." This goes beyond those who teach and preach, now. Politicians come to mind easily: think of campaign seasons when leaders vying for television ratings and votes (in that order) cut down opponents in order to invalidate and eliminate them. When they use the language of "winners" and "losers" like misguided children arguing over candy on a playground. When the phrase "truth isn't truth" is found on the lips of people praying they can continue pulling the wool over voters' eyes just long enough to cover their own sorry behinds...when duplicity is forced at every single turn just to keep the status quo level and secure their place at the top of the pyramid. That example comes fresh to our minds. But the letter from James warns that *anyone* in positions of influence, anyone people look up to, anyone with authority over others, is standing in the middle of "a breeding ground for sin."

Perhaps some of you were listening to NPR this week to hear the story investigating how many children--CHILDREN--are disciplined on school grounds with tasers fired by school security officers, mostly employed by the police department or a private security company. CHILDREN. The authority given to security guards in these stories results in their deployment of a weapon that can cause cardiac arrest on children with bodies sometimes less than 70 pounds. These incidents were shared in the news story not to show how much of a threat children are to armed security guards, but instead to show how poorly trained and how weak the resolve of too many security workers in school settings. Again, from *Feasting on the Word*, "[the letter from] James forces us to confront the questions, Could the same results been obtained without the destruction of others? And if so, why do they speak destructively? Indeed, can destruction serve God's desire for humanity?" What we get handed down, ultimately, from Greco-Roman culture, among many other things, is the power of language. Words matter.

William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde and Flannery O'Connor have penned many aphorisms about the power of the tongue when it goes unbridled, prompting readers and theater-goers to consider whether they themselves should hold back their own tongues from wagging too often without thought. But the truth about words and language goes far deeper than impulsiveness, and the power of words and language was attested to long before Shakespeare began to write.

God created the world, the heavens and the earth, the light and the dark, the entirety of the cosmos, through speech. *Words create worlds*. "Let there be light" and there was light and God called it "good." Or consider the world that

was shaped when the first human, Adam, was given the power to name the animals. Biblically speaking, if you know someone's real name, if you have the proper words to describe them, you have an immense amount of power, whether you are considering what exactly to call a leopard or a poison dart frog or a jellyfish, or whether you are trying to trick the imp Rumpelstiltskin or whether you are naming God "El-Roi." The power of a true name, the power these words convey, need only be attested to by our transgender friends, who all but beg us to take the time to *learn and use* their preferred, their *true*, pronouns and names.

During my first semester of Divinity School, I took a class on writing a spiritual autobiography. The first assignment was "the word becomes flesh" with the prompt to write about "what word, the very moment it was uttered, took on a life of its own?" Words create worlds, shape reality, form power relations, and take on their own lives and associations, carrying these with them whenever they play around in grammatical gymnastics. Take for example gendered pronouns for God: though we know that God has no physical body with genitalia that gives clues to sex and gender, so many people consider God to be male and they refer to God with "he, him, and his" pronouns. And even though we here may be among those more used to using many different pronouns for God, or no pronouns, I have to admit that sometimes my tongue slips into saying "Father God" and "He loves us" and "His will" because that is the world that I have been associated with for the majority of my life...a world where God is male and therefore pastors are male and therefore women are less than because they (I mean we) are further from God's love. Words matter.

Even, and especially right now, in the world of sports, where the capacity for humans to attain great speed and show great agility seems to push bodies into the spotlight more than speech, consider the words used to describe the NFL players who kneel during the national anthem or the words assigned by commentators to describe Serena Williams' "hysteria." Those words matter, because they bring to light the deeply held racist and misogynistic ideas that are alive and well, continuing to create worlds, continuing to name and assign value. The world of those words for Colin Kaepernick and his allies is the same world that allows someone to run for governor in Georgia while urging voters to resist from "monkey-ing it up" by voting for his African American opponent. These words indeed do have flesh.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Whether we mean to or not, we construct worlds with speech. Describing the world we see, we mistake it for the whole world. Making meaning of what we see, we conflate this with God's

meaning.” The letter of James urges us to recognize the authority we have contained in the distance between our minds and our mouths. The authority to name, assign value, build up, tear down, create a worldview that others may adopt and make a home in. And though, as USAmericans, we may have been brought up repeating the adage, “sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me,” when getting teased on the playground, deep down we know that’s not true. How very American it is to focus on the physical threat of sticks and stones while completely ignoring the words people utter. How often does intention get measured over impact? “Well, I didn’t mean it” or “don’t be upset, it’s just some words.” Well, elementary Anita knew that was wrong. A little boy who called me “chicken legs” because of my pale skin caused me to be self-conscious about wearing shorts or skirts or swimsuits *to this very day*. I can literally not get dressed for a fun summer day without his voice echoing in my mind...and my heart asks, “is that true?” because I have learned to inhabit the world created by his words for over twenty years. And knowing this, we cannot traverse this world so glibly...we owe it to each other to hold back the sticks and stones, and we need to continue to learn to balance intent with impact.

After all this, the epistle of James is not just prompting us to think about our words so that we understand their power to clothe themselves in flesh and therefore live with more intentionality. The writer also points out the hypocrisy in human living, and furthermore, in Christian living. “People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way! Both freshwater and saltwater don’t come from the same spring, do they? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree produce olives? Can a grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and freshwater doesn’t flow from a saltwater spring either.” The duplicity of speech comes when we give lip service to God the Creator of the Cosmos, the Source of All Life, the Origin of Good and Love...and then we turn around and curse others, deriding them even though they are made in God’s image, God’s very likeness is imprinted on each and every human being. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that often people have shown up to springs labeled “Fresh Water” only to receive a cup of saltwater. And we Christians think we are in the business of sharing the “Living Water.” This is where the breeding ground of sin is most fertile--in the temptation to hypocrisy that is nourished by complacency. Mark Douglas writes, “Evil, for James, is not defined by consistently foul action but

by its capricious movement between the fair and the foul...Such a definition, incidentally, is all but mandated by an anthropology that recognizes humans as both made in God's image and capable of cursing others."

Our Scripture for today concludes with a word about wisdom: "Are any of you wise and understanding? Show that your actions are good with a humble lifestyle that comes from wisdom...wisdom from above is pure, peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts." And how are we to be wise? How are we to be and do good in this world where evil is so easy, so comfortable, so near? Again, Mark Douglas writes in *Feasting on the Word*, "Becoming wise means learning how to think carefully and virtuously in complex situations where one is tempted to think simplistically and act recklessly."

But, friends, I have a confession to make. This text from James was hard for me. It seemed to be all about reigning in the tongue and the ego, probably written to a community that needed to tame their speech and stop the spread of gossip around their *Christian* community. But I've never had to be lectured on being quiet. I've never had to be told to hold my tongue. I've been socialized this way. I've been taught by examples in society to undercut my own feelings, my own thoughts, to reign in my own ideas and creativity in favor of hearing someone else's. I've been taught that my voice matters less, that my opinion is not as valid as others, all based on the facts that I am female and I am young. So sometimes wisdom for me looks like choosing to share what others may not like to hear, speaking up for myself, calling out people who have abusive and manipulative behaviors. I have learned that my voice is important, that it is alright and necessary to share my righteous anger and it is the work of wisdom to shut down entities that systemically disenfranchise people, particularly people of color, women, gender-non-conforming people, immigrants and children. The work of wisdom is to advocate for understanding all people as made in the very likeness of God.

The Creation of the world through speech was intentional. Not only did God name one by one the ways the cosmos were to be shaped, but Wisdom worked with God in declaring with appreciation and awe the divine work "good." Wisdom also works through the Psalms and the book of Ecclesiastes and the teachings of Jesus and the epistle of James to share that wisdom is being authentic, being genuinely in love with the world in such a way that we do not put up with injustice any longer. Author Vera Nazarian writes, "Yawns are not the only infectious things out there besides germs. Giggles can spread from person to person. So can blushing. But maybe the most powerful

infectious thing is the act of speaking the truth.” And speak the truth we must. And speak the truth we shall. In love and in wisdom, breaking the sticks and shattering the stones, co-creating a world where we all recognize our identity declared “good.”