WORDS: BLESSING AND CURSE

James 3: 1-12
September 16, 2012; 24th Sunday in Ordinary time, b
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Prayer: Take these old words of scripture and do something new, dear God. Startle us with the freshness of your love for us, and for all of creation. And may the word of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I love history and I love biography, so several years ago I particularly enjoyed Walter Isaccson’s biography of Benjamin Franklin, and was reminded about Franklin’s cleverness, his role in shaping our nation, his scientific curiosity. But I’d forgotten just how many popular proverbs emanated from Poor Richard’s Almanac: “A penny saved is a penny earned.” “Fish and visitors stink after three days.” “Little strokes fell great oaks.” And “God helps those that help themselves,” which way too many people assume came from the Bible. Fact check alert: IT DOESN’T!

Some of you might have heard what happened when a teacher asked her elementary school children to complete some of these saying. They were given the first part of the proverb, and asked to fill in the rest:

Strike while the … bug is close.
It’s always darkest before … Daylight Saving Time.
You can’t teach an old dog new … math.
A penny saved is … not much.

There are beginnings and endings that belong together, and others that just don’t. James tells us that blessing the Lord our God and cursing those who are made in the likeness of God, is among the latter. Our words matter.

“The tongue,” James writes, “is a fire… How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire.” He is troubled by the fact that from the same mouth come blessing and curse. “With our tongue we bless the Lord…and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” James says this is because there is a kind of internal war going on within each of us and we have to learn to bridle our tongue lest we hurt and malign those around us whom we love.

What James knows, and we would do well to remember, is that words do have power. Power to heal and power to hurt. Power to build up and power to destroy. Power to praise and power to defame. Power to bless and power to curse.
One of the lies I grew up with, and one that I’m sure I perpetrated with my own children when they were younger was “stick and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” No, words can hurt us, and they can also heal us.

Why do words matter so much for James, and for us? After all, he’s the one who is so concerned with how we behave, what we do. “Faith without works is dead,” he writes. But words matter. First of all, it’s a matter of integrity. You can say you’re a Christian all you want, but if you turn around and say really nasty things about other people, then you’re no more a Christian than a cat that calls itself a fish. As James says, olives aren’t going to grow on a fig tree, and fresh water can’t be drawn from a brackish well. Jesus puts it even more graphically: it’s not ritually unclean food that defiles — that just gets slushed down the drain. It’s what comes out of our mouths that defines us, because whatever comes out of our mouth proceeds from the heart. Our words reveal who we really are — for better, or for worse.

But beyond our personal integrity, our words also reflect on our community. I remember hearing Jim Lowry, my predecessor here, recall how his father would always instruct him before every date he ever had, “Son,” he’d say, “remember who you are” — that is, remember you’re a Lowry, because anything you say or do affects the honor of the family. Against his sometimes stronger urges, Jim reported that he took this lesson to heart, and managed to keep the Lowry name unsullied.

The same is true for the way we wear the name Christian. If the people in our offices or clubs or schools or homes know that we call ourselves Christian, then anything we do or say—or neglect to do or say—reflects on Christ’s name. If no one knows we are a Christians and our language rivals a drunken sailor’s, that’s one thing. But as soon as our faith is public, what we say and do reflects not only on us, but on the reputation of the Christian community ... as one of my Episcopalian friends from seminary discovered during his internship in Manhattan. Riding his bicycle down Broadway, Peter was pushed into the sidewalk by a cab driver. Outraged, Peter jumped on the hood of the cab and started pounding on the driver’s windshield, all the while screaming colorful invectives. Only later did he realize he was decked out in his clerical collar!

What we say at work, at school, at the grocery store — what we say reflects on the whole Christian community; and our words reflect us, on our integrity. But James reminds us that the single most important reason our words matter is that words do indeed have power ... and how we wield them can build up or destroy.

I don’t need to rehearse the pain that words can inflict. I still remember some names I was called my senior year in high school because I had friends who were of a different color than me. I haven’t been back to a reunion since.

There are words that masquerade as truth, but in fact are damaging lies. “I swear I didn’t touch a drop last night.” There are words hurled out in rage, words we can never completely take back, like “I hate you, Dad,” or “I wish you were dead;” words that hang in the air the rest of
our lives. There are words that kill reputations and destroy lives, cheap words of gossip and betrayal.

Words can devastate — one by one, life by life, heart by heart. And they can devastate on a massive scale. Who knows how many thousands upon thousands of lives were lost because Chamberlin appeased the Nazis with words, or because McNamara lied about Vietnam — with words. It was four simple words that led us into an unnecessary war for which we will be paying for generations: Weapons of mass destruction. Words can have devastating consequences. And they are an affront to God.

“With our tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God,” James says. “From the same mouth come blessings and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

In the Christian community, we hold each other accountable for what we say. Several weeks ago at a program staff meeting somehow the subject got off course and I was describing someone (not one of you!! ... but someone “out there”) as “an embittered, angry,” and then Anne Apple, bless her, interrupted me, “Child of God.” I needed that.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his monumental work of chairing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the end of South Africa’s apartheid, came to see the theological hypocrisy of apartheid’s laws. After cataloguing some of the gross inhumanity of that dark age, he concluded:

We are sisters and brothers of one another whether we like it or not and each one of us is a precious individual. It does not depend on things such as ethnicity, gender, political, social, economic, or educational status—which are all extrinsic. Each person is not just to be respected but to be revered as one created in God’s image. To treat one such as if they were less than this is not just evil, which it is; it is not just painful, as it frequently tends to be for the one at the receiving end of whatever discrimination or injustice is involved. No, it is veritably blasphemous, for it is to spit in the face of God.”

Our words have power. They have the power to praise our God and Father, but they also have the power to destroy ... to devastate the very people whom God claims as his beloved children. Their damage can be great — especially in the church.

Barbara Brown Taylor warns us that even today, the most frequent reason given by those who steer clear of churches is the duplicity of Christians. Many of these people can tell you the exact details of how many times they have showed up at springs marked “Fresh Water” with cups in hand, only to end up with mouths full of salt water. You can remind them that no one is perfect. You can tell them that churches are made up of human beings, after all, and there is always room for one more hypocrite. But they have a point. James knows they have a point. If
God’s gracious word does not show up in the flesh of a congregation—if those who hear the word do not incarnate the word — then the tongue has worked a wicked spell on them.\(^2\)

But if all that is true, then surely the reverse is true too: If words have the power to tear down, they also have the power to build up; if words have the power to hurt, they also have the power to heal. Words have the power to change the world, and to change the world for good. Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream”…. John Kennedy’s “Ask not what our country can do for you….. Abraham Lincoln’s “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent”….. Martin Luther’s “Here I stand; I can do no other.” Or that elder African-American domestic worker who walked miles to work rather than sit on the back of a bus: “My feet are tired, but my soul is rested.”

In the sweep of history, “mere” words have changed everything. Words have toppled illegitimate regimes; words have rallied people to freedom; words have transformed the course of human events.

And in the invisible history of our own small lives, words have changed us too. This week I went around asking folks if they could think of occasions when words — positive words-transformed their lives. Stories came out immediately.

In my case, it was my senior advisor in college. I had been working with him for a year on an independent story, putting everything I had into it, handing in a chapter at a time. When it came time to write and hand in the conclusion, I did a hurried job … 3 pages out of 100. It was spring, after all. Graduation was only a month or so away. He read it, and gave it back to me. “You can do better.” That was a blessing, because from then on, I did.

One woman recounted her very first job. She was very shy, never did complete college, and got a job as an accounts manager for a particularly harsh and profane man who had started the company years ago. Her life changed when he told her, “You’re doing a much better job than I ever did.”

One said the words that transformed him were when the woman he loved simply said one word when he asked her to marry him, “Yes.”

Ordinary people, using ordinary words, can bring ordinary strength to others’ lives. I remember hearing a woman in Atlanta tell a story of words that changed her. This woman was a leading citizen of Atlanta, had done very well. She told of growing up with a cleft pallet. She didn’t have many friends at all. Other kids either avoided her or made fun of her. So she would stay after school and help the teacher straighten up, clean the blackboards, put the books up.

The teacher appreciated it because she didn’t have any children of her own, and saw something very special in this child. Every year it was up to the teacher to give hearing tests. She would whisper something in the child’s ear just to make sure the hearing was OK. Generally it was
something like “The sky is blue.” “The dog jumped over the fence.” When it came time for this girl to be tested what she heard in her ear were the words “I wish you were my little girl.”

I think what this world needs is more blessing and less curse in the midst of all the words that pass by us each day and in all the encounters with others that we encounter. Communication that bears on its wings something of the presence, the justice, and the peace of God.

And sometimes I think the world is far more full of blessings than we realize if we will only be alert to God’s presence among us even in the most unexpected of ways.

In just a little while, we’ll stand together and say the words of the Apostle’s Creed again. But proclaiming our faith—“blessing the Lord and Father,” James tells us—is only the beginning. There are beginnings and endings that belong together, and others that just don’t. Our lives are so fragile, you know. Words have the power to harm, and words have the power to heal. When we leave this sacred space, what will we say next?

It’s my guess that there is someone in your life who needs a word from you, an encouraging word, or a challenging word, or a tender, comforting word. What will that word be? That words you say, matter. Through the power of the Word made flesh, our words do matter, more than you may ever know.

Amen.

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1 Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, p. 197
2 Barbara Brown Taylor Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, p. 67.