

Sermon “Being Responsible With Sparks”

Kirk of St James

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I used to wonder, with all the collective wisdom around us why we often end up learning things the hard way--then I had children. Every guideline, rule and boundary is simply something to be tested. Don't jump off that you will get hurt. If you don't go to the bathroom now there is nowhere to stop. Don't throw sand you will get it in your eye, are just some of the things I have said lately. Although the reality is we likely learned a lot of these lessons the hard way as well. Sometimes we simple have to experience the consequence to understand the action. While it would be nice to think that we often move past the learning stage in our lives we know it is not true. We have moments when we know we should do something now to cause us less issues later but alas we don't take our own advice. While learning can often be tough James tells us today that being a teacher is even harder.

Looking at our readings today, it seems fitting that James is speaking about teaching. Over the past couple weeks parents have been buying school supplies, preparing teenagers for their move to university or college, and children are looking ahead to school and activities. Facebook was flooded with back to school photos! School is often a transitional moment in our lives. It is a place of learning, beginning, growing and ending. James reminds us, that when people are entrusted to our care, when we are given the responsibility of teaching others, it is of ultimate concern. There is power in our words, and James likens it to a spark able to set a forest ablaze. Teaching is no small matter.

Have you ever looked back on your favorite teachers? What characteristics did they have? What made them stand out among the others that you had? More often than not our favorite teachers were likely people who listened to us. Who loved to share their knowledge in

ways that caught our attention or sparked our imagination. They communicated in ways that were meaningful to us, or changed our lives. Some of us hold memories of teachers who encouraged us, and helped us find our way. However, some of us likely also have memories of moments when our teachers said discouraging things, or made things harder for us. Sometimes those memories can cling just as tightly. There is power in words when we use them, and all too often, it is the wrong words that stick to us, and with us, and the right words fade away.

While Martin Luther did not have much use for the book of James, often referring to it as the "straw epistle" there is a lot of wisdom to be found here today. While the temptation to read this particular passage may be to picture this stern warning as being directed toward an image of a teacher standing behind a lectern lecturing, or in front of a chalkboard in a classroom, the reality is that casts too narrow a net around what it means to teach. To paraphrase one author who wrote about teaching "However, when we think about growing in faith, rather than being tested on a body of knowledge, teaching is much less clearly defined. Are our parents, who modeled their faith by attending church or reading scripture, teachers? Are mentors, who guided us through claiming our baptismal promises, teachers? Are the people we serve at the Upper room our teachers? Are the children who sing their faith in our worship the last Sunday of every month our teachers?...What should be evident from this series of questions is that we are all teachers and that we are all taught when it comes to faith, just by virtue of living a life of discipleship."

The beauty of Christian Community, the humbling part of Christian community, is that we are always both teacher and student, and that is a beautiful way to live our lives. I remember when I first started here I would occasionally find odd things on the church steps. One moment in particular sticks out, coming in I noticed a bag of second hand footwear and I remember complaining about people leaving garbage on the church steps. However, it turns out that there

was a sweet man named Michael who would go around collecting things he thought would help others, and he would leave them at the church because churches help people. Michael was one of the most faithful disciples of Christ that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. The way he lived and the way he spoke were in perfect harmony.

Perhaps one of the largest dangers when we are a Christian is how easy it is to lose sight of teaching and learning. As one author pointed out sometimes in our teaching we can be arrogant, or offer pat answers with no room for questions. Maybe we try so hard to teach and explain our viewpoints, we lose sight of people and forget to listen. Perhaps we refuse to learn from people because they offer an insight or an opinion that differs from our own. Perhaps we feel we have nothing left to learn. It can be difficult sometimes, and we must always work at being open both to teaching and to learning.

While this passage does deal with teaching and learning, it also reminds us of the power of words in whatever we do, especially in a world that is globally connected. Words have the ability to win elections, start wars, bring peace, and change the course of history. They have the power to build people up, and bring people down. They have the power to create dreams, or rip them away. Looking to history there are hundreds of speeches that have stood the test of time, and their words continue to ring down to us, like Martin Luther King Jr. who had a dream among so many others. Words that come so easily off our tongues can change everything for better or worse.

When James identified the tongue and language as one of the biggest dangers in our Christian lives he was speaking a deep truth. We only have to look at the current political climate to know that words have a way of reverberating around the world for better or worse. Words can inflame, and words can bring peace. Words can heal, and words can cut. This passage of James uses a lot of imagery but in particular verses 11 and 12 stand out. "Does a

spring forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.” James is once again pointing to the truth that a life of discipleship cannot say one thing and do another. “The tongue is a fire” he says, “a word of injustice. The one who shows partiality to wealthy guests and dishonours poor ones or who offers pious blessings to the poor but refuses to alleviate their suffering does a world of damage.” One modern example that has come under scrutiny the last few years is the phrase “thoughts and prayers.” Many have pointed out that while it is nice sentiment it is also a way of avoiding doing anything concrete in the face of a challenge or issue. What we do and what we proclaim need to be in sync.

During these early days of September this passage in James is a powerful reminder of what it is to live in Christian Community. That we are both teachers and students. Whether we are long graduated from school or not there will always be more to learn. It is also a reminder of how important the words that we chose in teaching, learning, and living can be. They can build up, or they can tear down, they can instill hope or take it away. My prayer for all of us as we settle into a new year is that we continue to learn, to teach, to build others up, and for us to be built up in return. May we always use our ability to speak to show love and compassion, may hearts and mouths pour forth Gods grace into the world.