

“Words”
James 3:1-12
September 16, 2018

Back in elementary school in the Midwest, children are not only graded A,B,C,D on certain subject matters, but they are also graded Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory on a number of topics, ranging from gym class and art to social skills. The accent was not so much on accomplishment - some people will never be talented at art, and it would be mean to flunk them when they really tried. So even the most untalented musician could achieve a rating of Satisfactory, depending upon the attitude with which they approached the task at hand.

For the most part, I received ratings of Satisfactory, even though I was generally among the last team-mates to be chosen for sports in gym class. It wasn't MY fault that I was uncoordinated - although my classmates often had less kindly words to describe my lack of physical prowess. But there was one area my teacher would often mark me right in between the two categories - not quite Unsatisfactory, but definitely not Satisfactory, either. The category in question was “Works without disturbing others,” which was a nice way of saying that little Steven couldn't keep his mouth shut: not that I would interrupt the teacher, but when it was time to be quiet and work in class, well, I simply couldn't stand the silence - or, as we now say, Nature Abhors a Vacuum, and I was ready to fill that vacuum with syllables, sentences, paragraphs, and more.

As the years went by, it only got worse. By the time I got to Junior High, my teachers would try to “punish” me for talking out of turn by making me get up in front of the entire class to speak extemporaneously for 10 minutes at the end of the school day. Well, that was no punishment! To have a captive audience before me was like feeding the fire, even if I didn't choose the topic of my 10 minutes. Seriously - I do that every week on a topic set by the scripture lectionary! I wasn't yet a teenager, but I was already in training for pulpit duties. If only the guardians of the Separation of Church and State knew that the public schools were preparing me for Ministry.

I'm telling you all this because the rest of what I have to say will show that I speak not only from scripture, but from personal experience. I won't give you any more instances of when I talked when I should have kept quiet. Keeping a confidence hasn't ever been too much trouble for me. What I will pass on to you is a story of when, but for the grace of God, I could have really messed up if I had said something.

In Scottish divinity schools there is a program for Presbyterian students necessary to fulfill a requirement for ordination. During the three years of study, Church of Scotland students had to be officially assigned to a local parish, serving as an student minister on a kind of internship. Even though I was a Congregationalist, I thought the idea had some merit, so I asked if I, too, could participate. In no time I was assigned to two small, struggling Presbyterian churches which shared a minister.

My first Sunday nothing was expected of me except to sit in the pew and observe what went on. The first church, as I may have told some of you already, was a beautiful stone building over 700 years old, set in a lush green pasture next to a grove of trees and a trickling brook. Everything was picture perfect: the sermon, the setting, the people. Except for one person. From somewhere during the hymns came an awful, bellowing sound that resembled heaven-knows-what. I almost said something to the minister as we rushed from that church to the next for the morning's second service, but there was so much else to say that I never had the time to ask who was making that awful sound that detracted so much from the beauty of worship.

The second church was quite different from the first. It was wooden, white-washed, set in a windswept field within view of the North Sea. The people were from a simple class with a simpler approach to life. In time I would come to appreciate this church even more than the first one, which for a while would impress me most - historically, architecturally, esthetically. But once again, in this second church, during the hymns, came that same awful noise.

It took the entire service for me to realize that there were only three people who had been to both worship services - the organist, who was a sweet elderly lady; myself, who was not yet accustomed to the differing tunes found in the Church of Scotland hymn book; and the minister himself. He was the culprit!

And was I ever glad that I never said anything. For if I had, what has since turned into a beautiful relationship between mentor and protege, between a man experienced in the front-lines of Christianity and young novice, between an understanding and patient man and a young guy who sometimes said too much for his own good - that beautiful relationship might never have gotten off the ground ... not, mind you, because the minister would have taken permanent offense at what I might have rashly said, but because I would never, EVER have recovered from the acute embarrassment of having been so ungracious towards a human being who was giving so much of himself to the betterment of someone he had never set eyes on before. It can be argued that my life might have been entirely different from that point on had I not kept my mouth shut.

This incident goes to show that an observation once made about scripture is certainly true. After reading Holy Writ, a sage observed that three things can never be recovered: an arrow in flight, an opportunity lost, and a word spoken.

God himself told Israel and the prophets many, many times that when God had spoken, his word would not return to him void - which is the Hebrew way of saying that once God has said something, it carries with it inevitable consequences. His word has the force of Law. It can also create, as when God said, "Let there be light" - and there was light. God's word can resurrect, as when Ezekiel was told to prophesy to the dry bones of Israel with the simple command, "Hear the Word of the Lord!" and an entire nation was brought back from the dust. God's word can redeem, as when God's Word somehow, inexplicably, miraculously became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

Our human words may not be as powerful as divine ones, but they do have a certain force. Do these words sound familiar to any of you? “We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

A few decades later, other human words stirred not only an entire nation, but much of the world: “We shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength ... whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender” - these words coming from someone who offered his people only “blood, sweat, toil, and tears.”

No, human words may not be as powerful as God’s utterances, but it cannot be denied that they carry a weight all their own. Is it any wonder that King Solomon, in all his God-given wisdom, observed, “A soft word turns away wrath; but a harsh one stirs up anger. A gentle tongue is a tree of life; but a perverse tongue breaks the spirit.”

Little children often chant “Stick and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” If only that were true! If only! It wasn’t too long ago that an insult hurled in anger could start a world war. Families have been divided for generations by even less. Friendships have been ruined, reputations irrevocably sullied, and communities split in factional animosity over simple words. No wonder Jesus warns us that “every idle word that you shall speak, you will give account of in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you shall be condemned.”

Now Jesus did not say this to scare us into becoming mute. On the contrary. To paraphrase an ancient prayer, we all must acknowledge that ‘at times we have spoken when we should have remained silent, and remained silent when we should have spoken.’ May God grant us the wisdom to know the difference.