

Little Things

A Sermon on James 3:1-12 by the Rev. Philip Major

St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ September 15, 2024

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. Our words can bring terrible consequences. Several days ago someone began spreading an evil, racist lie about the Haitian immigrants in the city of Springfield, Ohio. I describe the lie as evil, because the lie was told specifically in order to denigrate and hurt a group of people. To make matters worse, the people who spread the lie are intending to hurt a group of people who have endured persecution and violence. The Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio are not illegal immigrants. They were given permission to come to live and work in America, precisely because they faced persecution and violence in Haiti.

When this story first appeared on the front page of my newspaper, I promised myself there would be no need to make a direct connection between the lie being spread about Haitian immigrants, and our scripture passage from the Letter of James. But the people who first shared the lie with us on national television continue to repeat the lie. Those who are lighting the matches of hatred and racism are attempting to create more division, fear, and conflict among the American people.

On Thursday and Friday in Springfield, Ohio elementary school students, city leaders, and people standing in line at the DMV had to be evacuated from public buildings because of bomb threats. By the end of this week, the people of Springfield might have felt as if they were watching a massive fire, burning up the trust, burning up the fabric of their community, burning up their yearslong efforts to rebuild their city after decades of decline.

We have seen this story so many times before in America. Those who are afraid of the values and ideals described by St. Paul, the ideas of equality and community and harmony and love, are trying to get us to abandon the way of Christ and to hate one another. We will not abandon the way of Christ. We will not hate one another.

We will pay attention to our words. Words might appear to be small. Words might appear to be much less important than the larger actions we take. The author of the letter of James would take the opposite point of view. James' argues that things that appear to be small often have great power. He lays his foundation for this argument in the second verse of chapter three. *All of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect.* Is anyone perfect? No. Each one of us is going to make many mistakes in life. This is true regardless of our education and training or position or wealth or lack of wealth. Regardless of our parents and our family situations, each one of us is going to make many mistakes.

So we should examine our own behavior, especially our words. James continues, *Look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder... So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.* Things that appear to be small often have great power. For James, the prime example is the power of our speech.

James says, *How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.* Since every person makes many mistakes, people are often making mistakes with their words. And even though our words might appear to be small, they have an enormous impact.

Yet God has given us free will. So we are able to make choices about what we do with our tongues. *With our tongues we bless the Lord and Father, and with our tongues we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.* We have the ability to choose to do the good thing. Likewise we have the ability to choose to do the harmful thing.

Let's hold these three ideas in mind for a few minutes. First, all of us make many mistakes. Second, little things, like the words we speak, have much more power than we might expect. Third, each day we make many choices about whether we will choose to do the things that are good and healthy and loving, or to do the things that are harmful and destructive. Let's hold these three ideas in mind as we try to take a few steps that will move us deeper into our spiritual journey.

In the first step we examine our own behavior. James is exhorting the early congregations of Christians to take responsibility for their own words and actions. This is especially helpful for us today, as we are surrounded by many challenges. You are responsible for the words you speak. You are not responsible for the words other people are speaking. It is our responsibility to learn and speak the truth. It is our responsibility to examine our actions and acknowledge when we have made a mistake. As a citizen, it is my responsibility to

vote. It is not my responsibility to make an election turn out one way or another. As a Christian, it is not my responsibility to make everything right for another person, but it is my responsibility to try to help and support other people in ways that are healthy for them and for me. Sometimes we call this 'love'. This is the first step, which is the theme of the third chapter of James; we spend less time criticizing others and spend more time examining our own behaviors.

Now I encourage you to consider a second, deeper step, which is not part of the Letter of James. James says that the tongue is like the rudder of a ship. The tongue is a very small part of the body, yet it is capable of guiding us through life. With the tongue we guide our lives in the direction of the right thing, or in the direction of the wrong thing. But there is something that is smaller than the tongue that is even more powerful. The things that are guiding your tongue are very small, so small you can't even see them. Your feelings and your thoughts are guiding your tongue, so they are in some way more powerful than your words.

How will you shape your thoughts? How will you shape your feelings? If you choose, you can guide your feelings and your thoughts with an ancient practice found in most religious traditions: it's called prayer. Prayer is our way of allowing our feelings and our thoughts to be changed.

Sometimes people get this backwards. Sometimes people think prayer is about defending their feelings or their thoughts. Sometimes people think prayer is about getting God to change God's mind about something. C.S. Lewis reminds us: "Prayer doesn't change God. Prayer changes us." And this change in us is not a secondary, bonus part of prayer. This is the entire reason we pray. We pray because we know some of our feelings and some of our thoughts must be changed. We pray because we know some of our feelings and thoughts are dangerous for us and others. We pray because we know something important in us will die if we don't let our feelings and thoughts be changed through the activity of prayer.

Like anything, prayer takes practice. I can almost guarantee it's not going to happen the first time you try praying on your own, but when you find a way of praying that works for you, your feelings will change. Your thoughts will change. When you say thank you to God every day, you will find that you begin to feel more grateful. When you ask for forgiveness from God every day, you will find you begin to feel that you are forgiven. Some of your hurts, some of the injuries you have suffered, some of your anger, some of your fears will begin to change when you take this little action of saying a prayer.

Now I encourage you to take a third, even deeper step, which is not part of the Letter of James. James is very concerned about the way people in these Christian congregations are treating one another. I think that's great. But, especially for those of you who have spent at least a few years practicing James' instruction, I encourage you to pay attention to another thing that might appear to be very little. It's even smaller than the words you say to other people. I encourage you to pay attention to the words you say to yourself. We know they are tiny because you are the only one who ever hears them, unless you spend an awful lot of time with a good therapist.

Just as I have to be careful about the little words I say to others, I need to pay attention to the little words I say to myself. I describe them as little words, because the words I say to myself are usually shorter than a novel. They are not organized and intentional. I don't spend several hours each day working on my 'official statements' about myself. They are just little, quick comments I say to myself.

You and I can be very critical of ourselves. We can make harsh judgments about mistakes we have made. We criticize ourselves for the fact that our bodies are getting older, or that we are more tired than we used to be. Here is one thing I am absolutely certain about: God does not want you to be criticizing yourself. Let's make this really clear; You know all of those negative things you have ever said to yourself? God completely disagrees. Once or twice you might find yourself saying something like, "I look really ugly." God says, "That's not true. You are beautiful." God says, "You are beautiful to me. I created you in my own image."

The reason we have to come together in this place dedicated to God, is that we have to be reminded of God's love for us. We are here to be reminded that God also loves our enemies. We are here to be reminded that being a follower of Jesus means loving other people, even if they speak a different language, even if they were born in a different country, even if they support a different candidate for political office. We are here to be reminded of the central truth of our lives: God created each one of us out of love and for the purposes of love.