

The Worlds our Words Create

James3:1-12; Gospel Mark 8:27-30

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 16, 2018
Rev. Matt Matthews

Today is the Big Event. I can't wait. *Hearts, Hands, & Voices: One Community Together*. One reason I can't wait is that I look forward to having fun with you.

- Another reason I can't wait is that I look forward to us getting to know one another better; that happens, you know, when we eat together and work together and worship together.
- Another reason I can't wait is that I love Kona Ice and everybody gets to have Kona Ice for dessert.
- Another reason I can't wait is that we all want something worthwhile in which to invest our time, talent, and money; we aspire to support something that's bigger than ourselves. *Things like The Big Event*.
- Another reason I can't wait is that today we're putting our talk where our walk is: that is, we're working together on small but important hands-on mission projects.
- Another reason I can't wait is . . .

Well, you get the idea. I've been looking forward to this day for a long time. And I'm so grateful for the planning team who has worked so hard for so long.

As we think about our building our church community (which is what The Big Event is all about), it's appropriate that we consider how our words shape our community. Words build worlds.

By way of example, let me ask you a question. If I consistently called you dumb, what's the worst that could happen?

- You might get angry.
- You might get hurt feelings.
- You might hate me.
- I think the worst that could happen is that you might believe me.

If I consistently called you wonderful, you might believe what? *That you're wonderful*.

If I consistently treated you harshly, you might become afraid.

If I consistently didn't take you seriously, you might not take yourself seriously.

Our words create worlds.

That was the point of the poem Dorothy Law Nolte wrote in the early 1970's. She was a counselor and she wrote a weekly column on family matters for The Torrance Herald in California. One week she was pressed by a deadline and threw together a 14-line poem on childrearing, copies of which made it onto posters, plaques, refrigerators, and into family scrapbooks. It was passed along hand by hand for years before Mrs. Nolte got wind of it and was able to secure clear ownership and copyright. Some say the poem is pure drivel; but the poem's point is well taken. And, most importantly, is true.¹

¹ Dorothy Nolte, 81, Author of Parenting Poem, Dies, By MARGALIT FOX, NOV. 20, 2005, *The New York Times*.

If a child lives with criticism,
he learns to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility,
he learns to fight.
If a child lives with fear,
he learns to be apprehensive.

Our words create worlds.

If a child lives with encouragement,
she learns to be confident.
If a child lives with tolerance,
she learns to be patient.
If a child lives with praise,
she learns to be appreciative.

I talked to a man this week who has just begun leading a kindergarten-aged Boy Scout den. He said if he can help them learn, inside and out, the Scout Law, he will be happy. Then he recited it to me. (Do any of you old scouts know it?)

*A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind,
Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.*

If words create realities, then these are words I think we should probably hear more of. *Friendly, courteous, and kind* are words I don't hear very often in the news.

The twitter feed that grabs headlines almost every day is filled with bullying words and hateful, defensive, angry, and very often untrue and twisted words. I think a steady diet of these words is poison. While many of us choose to look away and turn down the volume, these words contribute mightily to our growing lack of civility.

(I'm tired of it. And with you I endeavor to learn and to speak another language.)

The Book of James is a good place to start. James urges the early church to be careful about the words you choose. Be careful how you use your tongue. Even though the tongue is a small thing—like a tiny spark—the words of our tongue can cause harm. A giant forest fire, after all, is often begun with a tiny spark. Likewise, a giant ship is guided by a small rudder. Even though our tongue is small, it can do great good. *And harm.*

Words create worlds. Be careful with your words. When they are spoken with hate, or when they are driven by

- rage
- or fear
- or self-centeredness, our words will likely come out twisted and do much harm, like shrapnel and shards of glass.

Our words can build up, or they can tear down. We can use our tongue for good or for ill. James suggests that even when our words are good words, we need to be careful; because faithful speech “that remains unrelated to faithful action”² is wasted speech spoken not by Christians but by hypocrites. James accuses the church of both blessing the Lord, on the one hand, and, on the other

² Proper 19, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4*, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 65.

hand, cursing “those who are made in the likeness of God.” *My brothers and sisters*, he writes, *this ought not to be so*.

So watch your tongue. Don’t gossip and complain, because gossip and complaint makes a community sick. Encourage others, because encouragement makes a community strong.

Today—if you haven’t heard—is The Big Event. We are working and singing and praying and celebrating as a means

- of encouraging one another,
- of building the church,
- of glorifying God, and
- of making our community both inside and outside our walls stronger.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”, Peter said, “You are the Messiah.” As they walked with Jesus, these disciples learned that their words and their actions should be used to point to God’s sovereign love. They learned to reorient their lives to serve others—even their enemies.

Paul would later define discipleship by using words like these:

-- Contribute to the needs of the saints;

extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you;

bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice,

weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another;

do not be a vain braggard, but associate with the lowly . . . (Romans 12)

Today, let’s practice talking and living in this manner. What could be a bigger event or better way than that? May God help us.

Alleluia!

James 3:1-12

¹Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or 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 wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Mark 8:27-30

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter