

“Tongues Can Be Flame Throwers”

Proverbs 1:22-33 James 3:1-12

Scott B. Martin - September 13, 2009

As children when another child said something cruel we would say, ***“Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.”*** We didn’t believe it when we were six and I know very few adults that believe it now. The plain simple truth is words can cause great damage. Hurtful words once spoken can not be taken back. Words can break up marriages; cause families to split apart; cause friends to become enemies and tear apart the social fabric of a church or a community. No wonder the writer of the book of James said the tongue was one of the most dangerous parts of the body. He said, **“the tongue is a fire”** that can set a whole forest ablaze and these fires come straight from the fires of hell itself!

Increasingly communities are finding it harder and harder to engage in the respectful give and take that democracy, at its best, requires. Sides seem to be hardening everywhere one looks. There was a time when there were moderate and liberal Republicans. Today you would be hard pressed to name more than one or two. There was a time when there were conservative Democrats. There are far fewer today. The same thing seems to be happening in many churches and denominations. The Southern Baptists are losing their more moderate members and churches and more liberal denominations like ours seem to be losing their more conservative members and churches. Everywhere one looks there seems to be a “sorting out” which if it continues, will, in the end, break down any sense of wider community in our churches, cities, and nation.

Perhaps one could expect this on contentious and complicated issues like health care, which will affect every one. One would expect this on such issues as abortion or unfortunately homosexuality; but it strikes me as a sad state of affairs when certain quarters of a community passionately object to something as simple as a presidential address on education. School administrators were subjected to all kinds of threatening and even abusive phone calls from some parents over President Obama's talk to school children last week. Paranoid fears of brainwashing and socialistic indoctrination were cited.

Can you imagine such a thing happening 20 years ago? I can't. Why President Bush gave a very similar speech to President Obama's back in 1991. How could a pep talk on education by a man who is living proof of what a good education, hard work, and natural talent can accomplish in this country be threatening to anyone? Clearly, something has changed in the body politic and in our basic dealings with one another and the change has not been for the better.

The writer of the book of James was very concerned about conflict within the church. James traces the source of this conflict back to how people communicate with one another. He compares the tongue to the rudder on a very large ship. The rudder is quite small and yet it is the rudder that steers the whole ship. Words, for better or worse determine which direction a community of faith, or I would say, the ship of state, the community, is going to go.

We have all heard that communication is essential to any good marriage. This is true. It is also true that real, respectful, and thoughtful communication is essential to building and maintaining relationships within any community. James says, "*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.” (James 3:6b)

It is important to note that James does not believe the tongue is doomed to being a source of strife within the community. He quite rightly points out in verses 9 and 10 ***“With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters this ought not to be so.”*** Clearly he believes that the tongue can both bless God and bless people around us.

Did you catch how this can happen? James basis’s this on the belief that all people are created in God’s image. Now granted, it is easier to see God’s image in some people than it is in others, but this does not take away from the basic point that ALL people are created in God’s image.

It may not be easy but this is what we are called to keep in mind as we speak to people or about people. If everyone would act on this basic belief the world indeed would be a far better place! Imagine for a moment if the “tea party” and “birther” folks would act on this basic belief in speaking about people in the present administration! Imagine for a moment if progressives would look at the “tea party” and “birther” folks in this light! It would make for a very different climate and a very different style of communication on all sides. Alright, maybe this is wishful thinking, but it is certainly something to work towards.

Let’s look at another key point that James makes. ***“Not many of you should be teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”*** (3:1) James is honest enough and self aware enough to realize that everyone, including himself, makes mistakes in how and what they communicate. None-the-less, those who

teach others through their words bear a “greater responsibility to use language properly, to build up the body of Christ, to build up the community, rather than tear it down, as the Apostle Paul would say.

I would also apply James warning to all those who use modern communications like: newspapers, blogs, books email, radio, television, etc. to get their messages out. All who use such forms of mass communication are especially responsible for what they say, unfortunately there are many, who in my view, abuse their positions to spread hate, ignorance and vitriol. Such people can be found on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Unfortunately they are legion: In my view Rush Limbaugh on the right is one and “shock jocks” like Howard Stern on the left is another. They can be found on mainstream networks like CNN and FOX and they can be found on countless cable shows, radio stations and bookshelves.

As Christians we would do well to avoid listening to them or reading their words, except to see what we are facing and to protect ourselves and our communities against their poisonous words. What they are doing is real news like professional wrestling is real. It is meant to be entertainment and to be entertaining they must constantly be bombastic. In fact they must become more bombastic as time goes on because their audience becomes numb after a while and can only be reached by greater and greater bombast.

We cannot control how others speak but we can control how we speak. James calls on Christians to “tame” their tongues, to “tame” their communication with one another and with the world at large. He asks an important question, ***“Does a spring pour 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 3:11-12) James is arguing that by the renewal of our hearts and minds we

can pour forth life-giving water and not brackish, salty water that kills everything it touches.

I am going to close by briefly listing five ways we can respond to conflict; but only the last one is truly appropriate for Christians, according to Joseph Phelps who originally came up with this list in his book *“More Light, Less Heat.”*

1. The first possibility in conflict is to **“join the fray as a fighter.”** People who take this approach basically get caught up in the fight like in a barroom fight in an old western, where one person takes a swing at another and soon every one in the room is fighting. No thought is given to the issue, you basically “Figure what side you are on, and start slugging the enemy!”
2. The opposite of this is the “Lover’s Approach.” This approach refuses to recognize any legitimate disputes and will not talk about any divisive issues. This allows for “polite pluralism” but not any real examination of important issues. Many think this is the best Christian approach, since it seems so “loving” and it prevents Christians from arguing or fighting. It also allows one to be lazy and cowardly in avoiding contentious issues, which whether we like it or not are real.
3. Another way to avoid the fight is to simply associate with like minded folks. By doing this one never really gets to hear the other side of important issues of the day. It might even be possible to assume that everyone believes basically the same thing, which of course they don’t.
4. Another approach is to say that while there are differences “You believe what you want to believe and I’ll believe what I want to believe and that whatever you or I believe is okay. As Phelps points out this approach ***“honors neither the position of the adversary nor one’s own position.”***

(p. 9)

The final approach is the one Phelps says we are called as Christians to engage in and that is the path of true dialogue with others who disagree with us. He is honest enough to say of this approach, ***“It is a difficult and sometimes lonely road where the spotlight rarely shines. It calls for a different kind of courage from that of the fighter and a different kind of love from that of the pacifist.”*** (p. 10)

Being a liberal myself, let me close this exposition on James 3 with a quote from conservative sociologist and Christian author Os Guinness, who calls for a, ***“‘chartered pluralism’ and respect for people, truth, the common good, and the ‘American constitutional tradition,’ for ‘principled participation,’ and ‘principled persuasion’”***.

The church, at its best can be the place where this happens on whatever the issues of the day are. Certainly we as individual Christians and as members of this community and nation are called to do our best to help this take place at all levels of our community and nation. ***“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’*** (Proverbs 1:20-22) Amen.