***TAME THE FLAME***

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Texts: Psalm 34:11-14 and James 3:1-12

 There is an oft-repeated saying that goes something like this: “If you can do something, then do it. If you can’t do it, then teach.” Some would surely add, “And if you can’t teach, then preach.” That saying in its various forms has always rubbed me the wrong way. I am, after all, the son of a teacher and the grandson of a teacher and principal. I am married to a teacher and librarian who is one and the same person. I am the father of a college professor and a seminary librarian. I serve in a Presbyterian tradition in which ministers, like my dad and me, are called teaching elders. But the roots of my dissent from the suggestion that “those who can’t do something, teach” goes further back – to elementary school.

 Fanetta Shaw was my teacher in both second and fourth grades. She was a tough but fair educator blessed with wry humor and a kind heart. She had a passion for teaching and compassion for those she taught. She was bright and capable, reminding nine-year-old me very much of my grandfather, in a grandmotherly sort of way. When she spoke, we listened. In all my years of formal education, no teacher had a greater impact on me than Mrs. Shaw. I never doubted that she could do whatever she wanted to do, and what she wanted to do – what she was called to do, what she excelled in doing – was teach. Perhaps you too have been blessed with such a teacher like Mrs. Shaw.

 James Michener, the prolific writer and Swarthmore alum, was once invited by President Dwight Eisenhower to a dinner at the White House. He answered the president with these words:

*Dear Mr. President,*

*I received your invitation three days after I had agreed to speak a few words at a dinner honoring the wonderful high school teacher who taught me how to write. I know you will not miss me at your dinner, but she might at hers.*

To which President Eisenhower responded,

*In his lifetime a man lives under 15 or 16 presidents, but a really fine teacher comes into his life but rarely.*

 James’ sermon to the early church is a word about those rare really fine teachers. At first glance, one might think James had a grudge against all teachers, for he writes: “*Not many of you should become teachers…*” This was NOT the passage quoted by Rachel and the Christian Formation team when recruiting Sunday School teachers this summer. I doubt that it has ever graced the cornerstone of a school, church, or college education department. They are not really words of encouragement, though some might consider them sage wisdom.

 I am reminded of the woman who asked the young minister, “*Were you called into ministry or were you just poorly advised?*” Are teachers, like preachers, called into teaching or are they just poorly advised? With all the demands placed upon teachers these days – do more for less pay with less flexibility and more criticism – one might well think that somewhere along the line they were poorly advised, but James suggests that good teachers are called. “*Not many of you should become teachers*,” he says. Why? “*For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*” James hesitates to commend that his brothers and sisters teach, not because he disdains teaching, but because he holds it in such high regard. A lot is expected of those who teach, especially those who teach the faith; James appreciates the life-changing impact that a good teacher can have upon those whom he or she teaches.

 In the church I served in Richmond several of my seminary professors came to worship each week. I was often asked if preaching to those learned folks who were my former teachers made me nervous. I always figured that the professors were the ones who should be nervous. I knew what I was going to say. They didn’t, and while there would be grace and forgiveness for the young preacher’s rookie mistakes, those same mistakes might cause folks to wonder just what those professors had been teaching me.

 That is James’ fear – just what is the teacher teaching? What is flowing from the teacher’s tongue to make a lasting impact upon those who are taught? It is not just the content James is concerned about. Teachers bear responsibility for what is said, but also for how they say it. I remember a seminary student who was criticized as being a poor candidate for ministry, not because of what he knew or did not know, but because he lacked all grace in how he said it. He was a pompous bully, or as Paul might phrase it in his great love hymn in Corinthians, he was a noisy gong and clanging cymbal, for his words lacked any spirit of love!

 James’ primary concern for his siblings in Christ is in what is said and how it is said; he is concerned about the taming of your tongue! Scripture has some harsh words for the tongue. It is described in various passages as a deadly arrow, a sharp sword, a restless evil, a sharp razor, or a devouring fire. “*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me*” may be the rule on the playground, but it seems to hold little merit on biblical grounds where the proverb contends: “*A soft tongue can break bones*.” Scriptural images of the unchecked tongue are of an instrument of vast destruction, wreaking havoc on the innocent objects of its assault. It is a fire that can burn out of control!

 The wounds inflicted by words often heal far more slowly than do the wounds inflicted by sticks and stones. Words can scar the heart and soul in places sticks and stones can never reach. Such are the scars of the child who is repeatedly told that she is no good; such are the wounds of siblings whose unforgiving words have separated them in stony silence; such are the cuts inflicted by brothers and sisters in Christ who find it hard to disagree without being disagreeable; such is the pain of the victim of a bully preacher who uses the pulpit to tear down rather than build up. Such are the burns suffered by the targets of malicious posts on social media that flame the fires of hate and give vent to anger with the push of a button: SEND!

The wounds of words uttered by an untamed tongue, including those spoken on social media, are not just flesh wounds; they run deep. They scar not only those to whom they are spoken, but also the one speaking. As Frederick Buechner cautions:

*If there is poison in the words you are poisoned; if there is nourishment in the words, you are nourished; if there is beauty, you are made a little more beautiful…A word doesn’t really say something. It does something.*

James’ concern is for what your words do. Do they build up or do they tear down? Do they bless or curse? Do they heal or poison? Do they nurture faith or destroy faith? If you build up others, you are built up. If you bless others, you are blessed. If you speak words of healing, you are healed. If you nurture faith, you may find your faith nurtured.

 Can you tame the flame that is your tongue? Can you speak no evil and remain silent when you have nothing good to say, and resist the urge to hurt others, and withhold the careless word that starts a fire burning out of control? We can tame animals (except for cats), but we can’t seem to tame our tongues. The same tongue that blesses God curses others; the same tongue that professes love for the Lord spews hate toward others; the same tongue that calls Jesus “Lord” calls others vile names. How do you tame a tongue that speaks faithful words in one breath and fickle words in the next?

 “Come, O children,” says the psalmist, “listen to me, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.” Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; it is also the beginning of taming your tongue. If you fear the Lord you may think twice about what you say before you say it. You may pause before pushing SEND! “*Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit*,” says the psalmist. “*Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*” If you have nothing good to say, bite your tongue or press DELETE. Do good with your words; promote peace not conflict. If you fear the Lord, resist saying something you and God would regret.

 In his book *Where Faith Begins* Ellis Nelson notes, “*Although we know God is the source of faith, we also know that God relies on human beings to communicate faith*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) That is our role. God relies on you and me to communicate faith, to tell the story, to speak the truth in love, to share the Good News in what we say, and in how we say it, and in what we do. For, our words and actions communicate our faith. God needs good communicators, good teachers who fear the Lord, teachers who tame their tongues, do good, and seek peace by trying to follow Jesus. God needs those teachers in classrooms and nurseries, in offices and homes, in shops and clinics, in the church and in the courthouse. God needs teachers to communicate the faith to a world of students waiting for a good word. Some of those students may be your children or your neighbors, your clients or your patients, your friends or an enemy. They will learn from you, whether you intend it or not, whether you know it or not, whether you want it or not. What then will they learn? What will they learn from you?

 Let them learn grace. Let them learn love. Let them learn kindness. Let them learn blessing. Let them learn peace. Let them learn Jesus – from you! Amen

1. C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins*, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1971, p.19 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)