

9/13/09 (John A. Baldwin)

The Letter of James from which our Epistle is drawn this morning might be summed up in these words “Practice what you Preach”. We are now in the third of 5 consecutive Sundays of hearing passages from James, so I believe it may be instructive to say a few words about this letter before focusing on today's verses from chapter 3.

Many scholars believe that this letter was written by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus. James played a prominent role in the life of the early church, particularly at the Council of Jerusalem in the Book of Acts, chapter 15 when he persuaded the Council to bless and empower Paul and Barnabas in their missionary journeys to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people), thereby extending the Gospel to the entire world.

James seeks to give practical advice about living a manner of life that is consistent with a Christian's claim of faith. He is concerned with moral and ethical irregularities in the lives of his readers. He wants believers not only to hear and accept the good news of the Gospel, but also to do it (JUST DO IT): “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only ” (James 1:22) James asserts that authentic faith must result in action: “Faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

James acknowledges that there are many trials & temptations in a Christian's daily life. Repeatedly we ask, “Why did this happen to me? Curiously, James encourages people to rejoice when they face trials and challenges because “the testing of faith produces endurance.” (James 1:3) The way we react to difficulty is a good indication of the depth of our spiritual maturity and faith. Those who endure are blessed, for God will supply all that is needed to face adversity, especially patience.

During the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther stirred up some controversy about this Epistle in his Preface to the New Testament published in 1522, in which he called James “an Epistle of Straw”. He later retracted this comment insisting that James is worthy of praise because it puts forth God's Law. At issue was the struggle Luther was going through in trying to reconcile what seemed to be a contra-diction between the Epistles of Paul with their emphasis on the pure grace of God, and James' emphasis on the need for works. Ultimately, Luther pulled both emphases together in these words, “Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works, but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith.” (from Here I Stand) In other words, you can't win God's favor by doing good deeds. God's love has already been freely given to you, no matter what you do. BUT, if you are not doing good loving things for others in your daily life...YOU JUST DON'T GET IT!!

Coming now to our reading for today from James, chapter 3, we find first some rather encouraging words....good refrigerator magnet words: “All of us make many mistakes”. In fact, those who can't accept this about themselves...who feel stress when they do something that is less than perfect are bound to have a lot of unhappy moments in their lives. I found great relief years ago in being able to laugh about my own foibles, mistakes and blunders...and I've had a lot of them. It is freeing to be able to admit to ourselves and others that we are less than perfect.

But James goes on, not to condone slackness and laziness, but to urge us towards greater effort in living a faithful Christian life. He focuses in on an aspect of our lives that often gets us in trouble: the words we speak. He writes, “The tongue is a fire....no one can tame the tongue 3 a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord, and with it we curse.” For us to be slack in our efforts to use our words wisely, carefully and lovingly is to invite all manner of problems, mischief and turmoil.

During my early 20's when I got upset about something I used to mutter “Curses, curses”. My girl friend at the time would counter this with the words “Blessings, blessings.” It became something of a joke between us, but it reminded me that we have a choice always to respond to things which upset us.... with curses (anger, sarcasm, scorn, belittling) or with blessings (empathy, patience, forgiveness, compassion).

During a recent wedding I had occasion to put this into practice. As the service began I saw a lot of people taking flash pictures as the bridal party came down the aisle. A wedding in the Episcopal Church is viewed as a religious ceremony with a certain amount of dignity and solemnity. So to are all services in the church, ordinations, baptisms, Easter and Christmas. They are not conducted for the purpose of getting great photos. Those can come later after the ceremony concludes. So I asked the congregation to please respect the customs of the church and not take flash photos during the ceremony. Everyone respected this except the professional photographer who continued to move all around the church to get every possible angle, including coming up behind me in the altar area. I was startled, shocked, and angry. I politely asked him to sit down, & while he left the altar area, he continued to take pictures during the rest of the service.

After the ceremony, before I had occasion to express my displeasure to the photographer, the mother of the bride approached me and chewed me out for being disrespectful to her photographer whom she was paying a thousand dollars. She would not have had the wedding at this church, she said, if she knew there would be restrictions on her pictures. I managed to hold my tongue, but I was very upset. When I conveyed this to my dear wife, she had the wisdom to change my approach from curses towards one more akin to blessings. She encouraged me to write a letter of apology that my actions had led to the mother being upset on the day of her daughter's wedding. Ann went on to say that she knew it would be very difficult for me to do this, and that she would willingly write it for me. Bless her heart, she did, and according to the members of my monthly, clergy supervision group (whom I shared it with) the letter was a masterpiece. It expressed the policies of the church and the reasons for them, but acknowledged the mother's upset and expressed hope that it hadn't spoiled for her the beautiful wedding of her daughter and son-in-law.

Blessings and curses.... we have a choice. How we frame, express and use our words can mean the difference between clarity, healing, and forgiveness or division, misunderstanding, and damaged relationships.

I encourage you to reflect on the words you have used this week. Using a metaphor of James: Have you spoken fresh or brackish words? Have you honored Jesus Christ or embarrassed him? Have you tamed your tongue, or enflamed it?