

“A Restless Evil”
James 3:1-12; Proverbs 1:20-33

Proverbs 1:20-33

- ²⁰Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
- ²¹At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
- ²²“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?”
- ²³Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
- ²⁴Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
²⁵and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
- ²⁶I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
²⁷when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
- ²⁸Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
- ²⁹Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
³⁰would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
- ³¹therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
- ³²For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
³³but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

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.

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The Sermon

There is a persistent story that in 1889 a Mr. Phineas P. Jenkins was traveling, by train, on business, and was appalled to find that the Pullman car in which he was sleeping was infested with bedbugs.

He wrote to George Pullman, President of the Pullman Palace Car Company, and got back a letter signed by Pullman himself, agreeing that it was an outrage, detailing steps the company would undertake, and vowing that if Mr. Jenkins would ever ride in a Pullman car again, they would be absolutely sure to do everything in their power to give him a clean, comfortable, and pleasurable trip.

Mr. Jenkins was delighted to a personal letter of apology direct from the president's office, and then found, in the same envelope, his original letter of complaint, on which was scribbled a note:

“Sarah — Send this [blankety-blank] the bedbug letter.”ⁱ

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

It's possible the jury may still be out on that question.

Joan Rivers, rest her soul, used to provide commentary on the best and worst dressed celebrities attending various “red carpet” events. Not long ago, she and an expert panel had narrowed down the worst dressed field to a group of three, about whom she said, “All three were scarier than my original face but...I have to agree [that the worst is]”—and she named a celebrity named Paula. She said, “I don't know how many of you read the papers, but just a few feet away from where Paula was standing, a sewer pipe burst. And yet, somehow, Paula's dress was still the worst [thing] on the red carpet.”ⁱⁱ

Have you ever been hurt by words? Have you ever hurt somebody with your words?

When I was a pipsqueak in the early 1970s, kids still used to say, without irony, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

Somewhere along the line, we grew up and realized that was a bunch of baloney.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire.”

I am occasionally reminded that it is possible to conceive that the world will continue to function even if it does not get to hear my words of judgment on every single thing that I hear.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book about Christian community called *Life Together*, laid out several approaches to being faithful to God and faithful to each other, and one of those principles he called, “the ministry of holding one’s tongue.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Because, “how great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire.”

Bill Bryson, in his *Short History of Nearly Everything*, shared the scientific information about just how hazardously powerful we are. He said, “You may not feel outstandingly robust, but if you are an average-sized adult, you will contain within your modest frame no less than 7×10^{18} joules of potential energy—enough to explode with the force of thirty very large hydrogen bombs, assuming you knew how to liberate it and really wished to make a point.”^{iv}

And some people, while not knowing how to convert their potential energy into 30 mushroom clouds, do still sometimes really wish to make a point. And they do it with words.

Sometimes, those words bring the mighty sword of transformative, divine justice.

But a lot of times, when they are not so noble, they just cause untold wreckage.

A guy in the church where I grew up used to tell a story of a young boy who, as a baby, had been trapped in a burning house, and his mother had gone in to make sure he got out, and in doing so, she herself had caught on fire. Her face had been disfigured. And years later, in the heat of a bitter shouting match, the boy got so frustrated that he burst out, “You’re ugly!”

And as the whole world came to a screeching halt, the Dad put his hand on his son’s shoulder and said, “You will never know what you just did.”

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.”

It’s as dangerous, with as much inherent power, as a match over a barrel of gasoline.

Meanwhile, Wisdom observes our interactions.

She's in the streets of the city, the public square,
the ball field, the traffic jam, the quadrangle on the college campus.

She hangs out at Starbucks

and jostles with the crowd in busy urban streets from Manhattan to Miami.

She rides in the traffic on the Golden State Freeway

and on I-40 all the way to its termination in Wilmington, North Carolina.

She reads every Facebook post; she hangs out in chat rooms;

she sees every frame of the 60 minutes of footage
that are uploaded to Youtube every second.^v

She's in the TV studio and the blogosphere;

the shock radio booth and the easy listening station;

She's in the line at the grocery store; the chairs at the pedicurist;

the waiting room outside the ER.

Everywhere people talk and write and interact and communicate,

every place where there is public discourse,

She is there. And today she says, and not for the first time:

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?”

“How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing

and fools hate knowledge?”

It's fun to be simple minded. You're not burdened by imagining that people have different perspectives than you do. You're not at all bothered by the possibility that your guesses about them might be wrong—and we are guessing, every time we say words like, “What she needs is” and “His problem is” and “I've already figured out why you would say what you just said.”

It's fun to be simple minded, because all you have to do is sit back and scoff.

Disciples don't have that option.

Everybody knows you should love one another and speak the truth in love. That's basic. But what about when the damage has already been done—when the rudder is broken, and the ship is sailing out of control; when the horse is running wild?

Tense and angry words have already been exchanged, and now we're *all* on the red carpet being judged by Joan Rivers, and we've all got sewage on our dresses.

As many others have said: so often people's experience of church has been bad news. It seems like it should be baffling to us how anybody even could—like, literally, even *could*—proclaim Good News, and have it come out as bad news.

If a young person, younger than you, came to you with a sincerely open mind, and really wanted to know something—not just to hear your thoughts, but to listen to your wisdom and be influenced by you, someone they respect and who they believe would not steer them wrong—

If that person came to you with open hands, in total trust, and asked you
what you believe about God,
what you believe about Jesus,
what you understand about the holy Spirit,
what you think the Church *at its best* is or can be,
why you identify as a Christian, if you do...

If that young, open, trusting, fragile person came to you and asked you those questions, what would you want to share with them?

I can imagine you would be so filled with love for that young person that you would want them to know the truth; and you'd also want them not to be afraid to look for the best in people; to be empowered to reach for something with more light and beauty and hope.

I'll bet you would say something about kindness, and generosity of spirit.

I imagine you would say something about the people who have most inspired you, and what they did that was so compassionate, or dedicated, or selfless.

I would be surprised if you didn't maybe even shed a tear or two, thinking about some unexpected, awesome kindness that had been granted to you by God, or parents, or grandparents, or friends, or strangers.

I can barely choke out the memory of three guys, when I was a 22-year-old waiter in a job I loathed—my guts used to feel like *this* every time I pulled into the parking lot before a shift, and I'd work every shift I could get.

It was late lunchtime, and three older guys came in and sat at a table, and they were funny, and I poured them coffee and brought them lunch and then they ordered dessert and I remember one guy just wanted me to put a piece of pie in a to-go box, and was bragging to the other guys, "I'm gonna have this with the nine o'clock news." Just decent, funny guys.

At one point they asked me what I was doing, and I mumbled something about starting seminary in the fall, and one of them said, "You're working your way through seminary?" And I went, "Well, I mean, they have financial aid—"

And all three of them went like this: they put their hands in their pockets. And I'm going, "No, no, you don't have to—" They'd already put the tips on the table, but they ignored my protest and put their hands in their pockets.

That's not much of a story, but it's as powerful a memory as I've got, and whenever I read the story of God visiting Sarah and Abraham, appearing as three guys, I have a very clear mental picture of what they might have looked like. And one of them went home and had pie with the 9:00 news.

I wonder what your stories are, of people who have shown you exceptional kindness, and what that did for you—not only in the moment, but for your understanding of what it means to be fully human, fully alive, fully cognizant that there is a God who created you and who has a concerned interest in your well-being and your fitness as a servant of God.

If a young person came to you with an open mind and open hands,
and put their trust in you as someone who would not steer them wrong,
and wanted you to tell them why you believe what you do,
I'll bet you would have something to say.

The story we've been entrusted with is awesome.
It's about healing and caring and providing;
it's about humility and kindness and justice
and being dissatisfied with systems that are not kind or just.

Living a life that makes real what we believe
will dictate at least something about the way we speak to
and about each other.

But it's about something infinitely greater than the way we treat each other.
The way we treat each other is only a *reflection* of what we believe;
it's just the *evidence* that we believe in the story that we have to tell.

This is more about who we are, because it's entirely about who God is: and we are
children of God, servants of God, creations of God who belong to God.

As such, what we say and the way we say it
tells the world something about what we believe about God.

We are equipped and charged with delivering good news.

I was stunned to learn, from the Ken Burns series on the Civil War, about the 50th
anniversary reunion at Gettysburg held in 1913, which included thousands of
former Union and Confederate soldiers, now in their 60s and 70s, camping
together on the site, swapping stories. The footage is deteriorated, but astonishing.

On the third and final day of the observances, they staged—this is true—a
reenactment of Pickett's Charge. "As the Rebel Yell rang out, and the old
Confederates started forward again across the fields, a moan, 'a gigantic gasp of
unbelief,' rose from the Union men on Cemetery Ridge.

"'It was then,' one onlooker said, 'that the Yankees, unable to restrain themselves
longer, burst from behind the stone wall, and flung themselves upon their former
enemies. Not in mortal combat, but embracing them in brotherly love and
affection.'"

One of the most decorated veterans in attendance called it "a transcendental
experience, a radiant fellowship of the fallen."^{vi}

We have good news to share—transformative news.

What does it mean to you to be a disciple? What does it mean to be you?

And how will you share that message?

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ⁱ <http://www.snopes.com/business/consumer/bedbug.asp#0S9SfCq2UzLPQ4vO.99>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.tvruckus.com/2014/01/14/joan-rivers-fashion-police-name-best-worst-dressed-at-2014-golden-globes/>. Look, I don't make this stuff up; I just find it on the internet.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. New York: HarperOne, 1978.

^{iv} Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. New York: Broadway Books, 2003.

^v <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2012/05/23/35-mind-numbing-youtube-facts-figures-and-statistics-infographic/>

^{vi} *The Civil War 25th Commemorative Edition - Restored for 2015* (DVD). Episode 8.