

So as of now, in most area school systems, classes have been underway for 2 weeks. Perhaps both students and teachers are finding their rhythm by this time, getting back into the swing of being *educated and* of being *educators*. I can still remember how I felt as a child about the bittersweet exchange of the glories of carefree summer vacation for the reassuring structure and fun social opportunities of the school year; it can be a challenging transition for a student. But if one is a teacher or a friend or relation of teachers, you come to realize it's probably an even *more* challenging transition for the teacher. Several teacher friends would tell me how early in August their dreams about being unprepared for the school year would start in, and how intense the preparations were to be truly well prepared for a professional role that is so often underrated, even though it is so essential. Many would argue that teaching in a school system is even more difficult now than it used to be, with literally more subjects to teach, more state and federal rules and guidelines with which to comply, and perhaps more complicated family situations from which their students are coming. It's so true that we need to respect and affirm those who teach---it is a calling, a vocation, which requires gifts only God can give---like patience, intelligence, resilience, organization, communication skills, and kindness. That's true for teachers in all *types of school* settings, for those who teach from their *homes*, *and* for those who will begin teaching our children this month in Children's Church, Kid's Connect, or Confirmation. If ever you have prayers to spare, send up some prayers for teachers. We will be installing and asking a blessing on *our* teachers in our service next Sunday. Teaching is a difficult, crucial, and joyful job, all in one, I'm thinking.

Our lessons this morning present us with an interesting contrast in regards to being a teacher, don't they? In Isaiah, we read of the prophet *celebrating* his calling to teach. We heard, "The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." Here we have a teacher who perceives their calling to teach as God-given, who believes that this same God has provided them with gifts for their calling, and who recognizes the importance of their teaching task: they have the opportunity to *sustain the weary with a word*. That is no small feat! Moreover, this particular teacher in Isaiah realizes that as a teacher, they are *first* a student---every morning God wakens them to learn something new. As we read, "Morning by

morning God wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.” First a learner, then a teacher.....all good stuff! Teaching sounds like an attractive undertaking!

In contrast, though, James has a much darker view of teaching, warning off prospective teachers, looking to weed out any weak candidates, apparently. He wrote, “Not many of you should become teachers, for they will face stricter judgment.” Not at all the kind of thing we’d say when trying to recruit teachers for children’s church! What lies behind James’s grim perspective here? It’s *not* that James considers teaching to be unimportant; rather, it’s the direct opposite: James considers a teacher and their words to be so *incredibly* significant, that he hesitates to casually recommend the task to just anyone. Teaching is serious business for James and should only be undertaken by the truly committed. Because teaching involves words, and words, in James’ mind, are *potent*. They are potentially destructive *almost* beyond belief. In the same way that a carelessly dropped match can start a forest fire that sets huge forests ablaze, so a carelessly spoken word can likewise do terrible damage to relationships and communities. You may remember that two weeks ago in our lesson, James waxed poetic about God as the Father of Lights, as the Lord who gives us all good gifts. In this passage, James again takes on the mantle of a poet, but he does so to create metaphors of how powerful the tongue is--in other words, how much our words matter. Large though a horse is, James states, a small bridle can control him. Huge though ships on the sea may be, a small rudder can direct their passage. Likewise, small though our mouths and tongues may be in comparison to the rest of our bodies, they can do more damage than all of our other parts put together. James is *impassioned* about the damage careless talk can do, as I’m sure you noticed. He wrote that while every other creature on earth can be tamed, the tongue cannot—our words are a restless evil, full of deadly poison, set on fire from hell. One wonders just what James had suffered as a result of harmful words when we read his fiery rhetoric here. One thing we know for sure: James is no optimist about human nature when it comes to our words! He points out that the same mouth will bless God and curse their neighbor, and that just shouldn’t be so. And since teaching so often involves transmitting knowledge through words, James has a very stringent attitude towards those who should teach, which makes quite a contrast with the life-giving image of teaching that we found from Isaiah in our first lesson. We all know that teaching is

essential, one of the most important tasks that anyone can undertake. We all know that teachers need our support, respect, and prayers. Let's take all that as a given. But *do* we all know how powerful words *really are*? Let's think on that.

Are words so powerful? Are they able to, on the one hand, sustain the weary, which is a remarkable degree of power? A super- power for good, really. Yet on the other hand, are they able to all too easily to utterly destroy relationships or communities, which is also a remarkable degree of power? A super-power for evil, in fact?

Here is my shameful confession for this week---I did not watch the Presidential Debate last Tuesday evening, although I made sure the Women's Group meeting ended in a timely manner to allow others to do so. And here's why I didn't watch---sheer cowardice and weakness. I couldn't bear it. I just couldn't subject myself to all of the inflated, heated, and bitter words that I knew would be a part of this, or probably any, political debate in our day and age. I completely respect and salute all who watched it live, but I just was too weary of words being used as weapons to put myself through it. In our era, and perhaps in most eras, politics turns words into weapons. And our public discourse has undoubtedly suffered, and our nation is so divisive and fractured as a result. One might point to our contemporary political scene as to bearing truth to Jame's perspective on the damaging power of words.

Yet, in stark contrast, just prior to the debate last Tuesday night, our Women's Group met, as I mentioned. Our Bible study was on grace. So heart-felt and honest and kindly was our reading of the Scripture from Ephesians and the surprisingly intimate discussion that followed, that several of us were in tears; I believe we could say with the prophet Isaiah that many of us who were present and feeling *weary* felt "sustained by a word" as Isaiah wrote---a word of grace from God. What a difference between that group of loving believers and our public political discourse, especially if you're feeling weary!

And we *are* weary, aren't we? Not just of our vitriolic political season, but weary in other ways also? Aren't we weary of wars in Ukraine or Sudan or the Holy Land that seem so endless, so futile, and so

destructive? Aren't we weary of violence within our own country where children can't feel safe in school or drivers can't feel safe on the highway? Aren't we weary of our own struggles with health or happiness or doubt or fear? Aren't we sometimes tired of the world and tired of ourselves, falling into the same old patterns or feeling lost and alone? I'm pretty sure we know what it means to be weary, and we know what it means to long to be *sustained* in our weariness by the grace of God---which can happen through that small but powerful medium: a word. And *all* of us have access to this powerful medium, we *all* can speak. And that should give us pause.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me” many of us learned as children. We'd shout it back defiantly at some neighborhood bully who had just called us a mean name. It's a catchy retort, but it's not true. In fact, it's patently false, as we've been exploring. Words *can* hurt us. Deeply. They can wound us, cut us to the quick, break our hearts. Just as they can bless us, affirm us, or change our lives for the better. I sometimes marvel at how easily we all get driver's licenses when you consider how much damage we can do if we drive carelessly; we might think driving is the most dangerous thing we regularly do, especially since we no longer give it much thought, for the most part. But, maybe we ought to require licenses for speaking, especially for speaking in a way that teaches or advises. And whether or not we are professional teachers, all of us regularly take on the mantle of teaching or advising others, and we can do so much damage if we are careless with our speech. That's why James advises us to use extreme care. The thing is--we can also do so much *good* with our speech. That's why Isaiah celebrates the healing and sustaining power of a word spoken in kindness. How can we use our words to heal, sustain, and encourage, rather than to belittle, judge, or do damage?

Let's consider Jesus for a moment. Christ, in the Gospel of John, is actually described as the *Word of God incarnate*. As that Word of God in flesh, *Jesus* used words in a powerful way. If ever there was a master words-smith, it was Jesus. He tells parables that still capture our imagination 2000 years later, like the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. He told those who came to Him in sickness, “be healed”, and they were. He told those struggling with brokenness, “your sins are forgiven”, and they were. He said to despised tax collectors

and sinners that no one else wanted to speak to, “come, follow me.” He speaks words of healing, words of invitation, words of forgiveness. He speaks words of truth, too, some of them hard to hear. But He *never* uses words to simply insult, belittle, deceive, or betray. We would do well to follow His example.

Our takeaway this morning could be that words matter. God’s words to us---of welcome, acceptance, forgiveness, healing—matter. Our words to others also matter. They can sustain the weary or they can set a forest fire of divisiveness and misery ablaze. It matters if our words are kind. It matters if our words are accurate. It matters if our words are truthful. Words are powerful. They can change a life for the better or they can be used as weapons. And not only literally spoken words, but written words, letters, texts, memes, emails, slogans. Thinking of James’ use of the forest fire image, reminds me of Smokey the Bear, remember? “Only you can prevent forest fires!” Maybe that’s true. We are responsible for what we say, to use the power of our words wisely, faithfully and well. Because here we are this morning, making a confession of faith in Christ through our worship, through our creed, through our singing and prayers. Shall we then turn around and use our same mouths to insult, belittle, or wound others? As James points out, the same mouth shouldn’t bless God and curse others. Shouldn’t we be looking to use our words to put out fires rather than starting them or feeding the flames once they’re going? A mouth that confesses faith in God in Christ should be a mouth that speaks words that bless, gift, and assist the good of others. A mouth that sustains the weary with a word. That is part of our calling to follow Jesus as His disciples. Amen.