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Sermon Title: Words Like Fire
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: James 3:3-11

James 3:3-11

If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or 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. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 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 come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

Sermon ideas come from everywhere. When you preach as much as I do and as long as I have, and teach three, four, five classes a week, you are always looking for ideas, always looking for inspiration. Inspiration, really, that is the goal of preaching: to be inspired, first; and to inspire you. To literally have God's Spirit in you, not only as you preach and you listen, but also in the lead-up to it: the preparation, the study, the ideas, the words. And, as I said, the ideas come from everywhere: a Bible story, a personal experience, a book I've read, something going on in the world around us.

Not all ideas should see the light of day. The worst sermon I've ever preached seemed like a brilliant idea at the time. It was called, "Streaking for Christ."

Yes, "Streaking for Christ." Anyone brave enough to admit that you remember the 1970s? Bad clothes, bad music, bad ideas, bad sermons?

So, in those bad old days, there was a cultural phenomenon called "streaking": college kids running naked across college campuses—naked on a football field, naked into classrooms and dining halls. "Aha," I said to myself, "That reminds me of the prophet Isaiah, who, in the Bible, walked around Jerusalem naked for three years to make a point." (Isaiah 20:3) Therefore . . . what a great idea for a sermon!

Take a contemporary fad, "streaking." Mix in a fascinating Bible story about a naked prophet, then make some sort of an application to daily life: the need to strip away our ego and pride; the need to get down to basics; the need to be unencumbered by material concerns. Mix all that together, and what do you have? Well, a truly awful sermon.

Today, I hope to do better with a cultural reference: A month ago I went to the world's worst movie, "The Oath." I thought "The Hangover" and "The Hangover Part II" were the worst. Nope, "The Oath" is worse. The premise, and yes, this whole sermon is a spoiler alert to prevent you from seeing it. The premise is that in the near future the government requires every citizen to sign an oath to the nation and to the president. And people have till the day after Thanksgiving to sign the oath. So far, so good. A little *1984*, *Brave New World*, *Mein Kampf*, but let's see what happens. All this plays out in one extended family gathering for the Thanksgiving holiday. Parents, grandparents, children, in-laws. You can imagine the rest. Too much booze, too much talk, too much politics, too much ego. Too much family drama and dysfunction carried over from year to year. Too much mouth. Yes, *mouth*.

As the Thanksgiving holiday unfolds, we learn who signed the oath, who didn't sign the oath. We heard the self-righteous excuses, the grandiose condemnations, all accomplished with more vulgarities per sentence than any film in cinema history; more insults, more stereotypes, the absolute worst of any right-winger's "f-bombing," the absolute worst of any left-winger's response with even more crass language. Everybody was so ugly. Frankly, when the movie was over, I was disappointed they were all still alive. Now, I'm not a prude, but this was beyond all reason.

People using their mouths to be as ugly, nasty, mean, hurtful, arrogant, vulgar, gross as possible. Sadly, embarrassingly, maybe it was the perfect movie for our times. Whether it's the world of sports, the world of politics, or the world of pop-culture, just about all of us are amazed at the degradation of language, the incivility of public and private discourse, the willingness of so many to get down into the gutter. It's easy for any of us to point fingers at who's to blame: some

public figure that easy to name and blame. But I think it's more important and instructive to look at ourselves. And since we are in Church, "ourselves" refers to the world of religion.

So here's an example from our world of religion. The other day I was reading *Christian Century*, an excellent legendary Christian magazine: great writers, great writing, great reportage on the full range of issues pertaining to Christian faith. Every issue includes a pop-culture review of either some movie or TV show.

In the last issue, for some reason, they did an extensive review of an HBO show, quoting verbatim the most vulgar language: let's just say words none of us would ever think to say in front of our grandmother or around the Thanksgiving dinner table. In a plain old TV review in a plain old Christian magazine, it was as though the editors decided, "O.K., we surrender. Whatever."

I mention that only as evidence of the degradation of language, and not even the real dangerous kind. The dangerous kind is what I want you to think about today. Vulgarities, a great professor taught me, are only proof of a small mind and a limited vocabulary. In fact, the Bible doesn't talk about vulgarities. Four-letter words and such have more to do with manners. It's other words that do the real damage.

The Bible talks a good deal about words, and over the course of 3,000 years of Biblical writing, the Bible gets increasingly worried about the dangerous kinds of words. The Bible first makes a big deal of words in the Ten Commandments. Ask anybody to name the Ten Commandments, and they come up with the big three: "Don't kill," "Don't steal," "Don't commit adultery." A few people might remember, "Don't make any graven image," or "Honor your mother and father," maybe even "Don't covet." But the ones that get most overlooked are "Thou shalt not bear false witness" and "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."

Both have to do with the misuse of words. In effect, God says, "Don't waste my name, don't vulgarize it." Nowadays "vulgar" means something "dirty," unseemly. It originally really just mean "common." Don't use God's name as if it's common. Save it for when it's special, needed, urgent.

The other commandment we often paraphrase as "Don't lie," but that's not the full picture. "Thou shalt not bear false witness" really has to do with society at large, that you can't run a country or a town that can't count on truthfulness in legal matters. That's why "perjury" is a big deal. Our whole social contract

relies on getting to the truth. So words matter. Use God's name as if it matters, tell the truth as if it matters. Because it matters.

Jump ahead to the New Testament, and Jesus uses the strongest language possible to condemn "insults." (Matthew 5:21-22) Yes, insults. While condemning murder, Jesus goes even further, talking about the ways anger and insults destroy people in such a way that it easy for worse things to follow.

Jesus also says, "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no." In other words, tell the truth. Mean what you say. You know the old joke about lying, "How do you know so-and-so is lying?" Answer: "Their lips are moving." You can't have a relationship, a contract, a nation, a friendship, when you can't trust what comes out of someone's mouth.

O.K., so far, the Bible says, "Tell the truth, mean what you say, don't be hurtful." By the time we get to today's Scripture, the Bible is crystal clear: The mouth is the most dangerous part of the human body.

St. James could not be more blunt. He writes, "The tongue is a fire, a world of evil, full of deadly poison; it corrupts the whole person, it sets the whole course of life on fire." Then James concludes, "Out of the same mouth comes praise and cursing." In my neighborhood we had a similar expression. If some kid went off on a particularly vulgar rant, somebody would say, "You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

James is saying the same thing: You've got one mouth. You use it to kiss your mother, to pledge allegiance, to say, "I love you," to recite the Lord's Prayer. Then, with the same mouth, you curse a blue streak when your team loses, you get gross and vulgar in some social setting, you repeat an ugly joke, you insult, you gossip, you re-tweet something that was wrong in the first place. James and Jesus are both saying words have consequences. They start fires. They hurt.

As kids, we were taught an old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." We were taught that with good intentions, but since the Bible wants us to stick to the truth, the truth is "names *do* hurt us." And those around us. I don't really need to give you a list, do I? Words hurt. The "the tongue is definitely a fire, a poison . . . that corrupts all around it."

That's why a month ago we sent out a "Pastoral Letter" with the title, "Stop It!" Reflecting on yet another mass murder, this time of Jewish worshippers, following on the sending of all those pipe bombs mailed to political leaders and journalists, both fueled and accompanied by hate-filled rhetoric against blacks, against Jews, against TV channels and public servants they hated—all of those

nasty words and hateful slogans empowering murder. Just as Jesus said 2,000 years ago.

So, I wrote, "Stop it! We beg you personally to be a bulwark, a dam against these twin sins. Slurs, insults, jokes, memes, tweets that get re-tweeted. We hear it, and we know for what it is. Sometimes outright, sometimes in coded words and dog whistles, but we know it when we hear it: anti-Semitism and racism. At school, at work, at the club. At the Thanksgiving dinner table."

"Stop it." I wrote. "No more kidding ourselves. No more offering excuses. No more nervous laughter or awkward silences. Stop it. Speak up. Walk away. Intervene. Show disgust. Let it register. Let your Christlike heart be known . . . Together: STOP IT!" (Pastoral letter, October 29, 2018)

Not every hate-mouthed bigot kills 11 Jews in a synagogue in Pittsburgh or nine blacks at a Church in Charleston, but every mass murderer of Jews and blacks begins as a hate-mouthed bigot. *Names do hurt us.*

This sermon really did begin with that movie, "The Oath," but what kicked it into high gear was a Facebook post from a long-ago friend. Turn to the inside front page of the bulletin. You'll see that stark image. I'll tell you, when it came across my Facebook page, it hit me hard. I mean, that really says it all. Everything Jesus and James were saying, everything we know to be true, everything the Bible was getting at, there it is: You shoot arrows out of your mouth, sharp-tipped arrows, poison, fire, straight from your mouth. Yes, it goes right through the heart of your intended target, *right through the heart*. It doesn't miss. It doesn't bounce off. It goes right through, corrupting the whole person, poisoning, burning, destroying.

In these contentious times, it's popular to try to guess whom the preacher's preaching at. Let me make it easy: I'm not preaching at anybody. I'm preaching at everybody. All of us. The abuse of words extends from the halls of power to the halls of college dorms, from locker room to boardroom to dining room, from trash-talking athletes to racist, anti-Semitic online memes and tweets, from grammar school bullying to campaign ads to misogynistic song lyrics, from white lies to full-blown all out "Pants on Fire" lies.

Let me sound like Jesus for a moment: Any time we allow that within our hearing, it's as if we did it ourselves. That's why I say, "Stop it!" You. Me. Us. Stop it.

I'll close with this: the day after 11 Jews were killed in their synagogue, a black pastor, Rev. Manning, stood in the pulpit of Emmanuel Church in Charleston, where nine members of his Church had been killed just three years before. Rev.

Manning preached on Proverbs 18:21: "The tongue has the power of life and death." "The tongue, our mouths, our words have the power of life and death."

We can stop the "death" part, the part of words that brings death to our nation, to our spirit, to ourselves.

Our final hymn says what I just said in 20 minutes, but it says it a lot better:

"I Would Be True," No. 608.

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.*

*I would be friend of all--the foe, the friendless;
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift.*