

There's Someone I'd Like You To Meet: James

James 3:1-12

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The Reformer Martin Luther famously referred to James as an “epistle of straw,” claiming the letter contained “not one whit of the Christian gospel.” Of course, some suggest that Luther had a bit of a “wagging tongue” himself, and it might be today’s particular reading that formed his opinion on the matter.

However he came to that conclusion, it seems a bit unfair to me. James might not be the first place we turn if we want to debate the intellectual nuance of faith. But if we want to think about how to live out that faith in the real world, where we are required to deal with other people on a daily basis, well, James has a lot to say about this.

James is perhaps best known for this, which comes just a few before this morning’s reading: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Faith without works is dead.” Too often we oversimplify what James is saying here. We hear him saying, “Your actions are what will save you.” We lift him up as a counterpoint to the apostle Paul, who writes, “We know that a person is justified not by works, but through faith in Jesus Christ.” So we characterize them this way: James cares only about works; Paul cares only about faith. But that’s too simple, and it’s unfair to them both.

Think of it this way: Paul is deeply concerned with how we become right with God. And to Paul, that happens only through the person of Jesus Christ — only through his death and resurrection. We can’t do it on our own, no matter how hard we try, no matter how many good things we do. We are saved because of what God has done for us through Christ. Period. That’s Paul.

But James would not argue with that. James is not making a claim about how we become right with God. He’s not making an argument about the means of salvation. He’s saying, if you really understand your faith, your behavior will demonstrate that.

Do you see the difference? Paul says, This is how we are saved — through Christ. And James says, Because we ARE saved through Christ — this is how we are to act.

And then in his very next breath, right after declaring that our behavior matters, James says, “Watch your mouth.” (That’s technically my mother’s translation, but it works.) That is the first and most important instruction when it comes to our behavior, according to James. Our words are a manifestation of our inner selves and our true disposition. Or to put it another way — our speech reveals who we really are.

A friend of mine in seminary once shared with an entire class that when she was really struggling with loving someone, or even just tolerating someone), she would look at them and mumble to herself, “Child of the Covenant. Child of the Covenant.” She said using those words, those words of our baptismal promises, helped her see difficult people in a new light.

When I was a kid, my favorite food was macaroni and cheese. It was a staple in the dinner rotation at my house. Except — and now this is embarrassing — we never called it macaroni and cheese. My family has always called that meal “cheese noodles.” I don’t know why. All I can tell you is that my grandmother called it cheese noodles, my parents called it cheese noodles, my brother and I called it cheese noodles, and my brother’s

children now call it cheese noodles. I remember having dinner at a friend's house, back when I was not quite yet able to read all on my own. My friend's mom asked me if I wanted some macaroni and cheese. "I don't what that is," I said. My friend looked at me funny. "We eat it at your house all the time." She showed me the pan. "Oh!" I said. "Cheese noodles. I would love some cheese noodles." "It's macaroni and cheese," she said. "No," I said. "It's cheese noodles." This went on for some time. Finally her mother showed me the box and sounded out the words with me. Macaroni and cheese. I straightened up to the full height of my five-year-old-self. "I don't care what the box says," I told her. "They're cheese noodles."

Even when I was confronted with hard evidence, I was not swayed, because over and over and over again, someone I trusted about these matters, told me that meal was called cheese noodles. So I believed it with everything in me. It's a silly little story. It's a silly little story until you start to think about what else might get taught that way.

Racism, homophobia, Islamaphobia, sexism, self-doubt, fear of our neighbors, fear of a vaccine — all of this is learned behavior.

In her memoir *Educated*, Tara Westover tells her own story of being raised in a radically fundamentalist Mormon home. As a result, Westover never attended school, nor was she home schooled. Nevertheless, she earned her bachelors degree at Brigham Young University, studied at Harvard as a visiting scholar, and earned her PhD in history from Trinity College in Cambridge. These accomplishments ruptured her relationship with her parents, who adamantly opposed formal education as being a dangerous government plot and surely the work of the devil.

Her memoir chronicles the difficulty we all have when we challenge the things we have been taught from a young age, even after we are old enough to learn differently. She remembers talking with her friend Charles

during their undergraduate days: "I told Charles about earning a scholarship that meant I could return for a second year. I'd meant it as a brag, but for some reason my fears came out with it. I said I shouldn't even be in college, that I should be made to finish high school first. Or to at least start it. Charles sat quietly while I talked and didn't say anything for a long time. Then he said, "Are you angry your parents didn't put you in school?" "It was an advantage!" I said, half-shouting, surprising even myself. My response was entirely instinctive. It was like hearing a phrase from a catchy song; I couldn't stop myself from reciting the next line. Charles looked at me skeptically, unable to reconcile that with what I'd said moments before. "Well, I'm angry," he said, "Even if you aren't."

Westover wrote, "I said nothing. I wanted to explain to Charles about the Illuminati and the government plots and the biased, dangerous material that propagated school systems. But the words belonged to my father, and even in my mind they sounded awkward. But rather than doubting the words themselves, I doubted myself, and I was ashamed at my inability to take possession of them. I believed then — and part of me will always believe, even with all of my education — that my father's words ought to also be my own."

Whether we welcome it or not, whether we even realize it or not, words wield an incredible amount of power. They shape us and they shape the world around us. We are seeing this played out in our own lives today as the Delta variant runs rampant. Researchers and scientists at the highest levels who have spent lifetimes researching vaccines and efficacies and safety tell us again and again that not only is the vaccine safe, it is our best tool against a virus that has claimed well over 600,000 lives in this country alone. And yet there are some who have sought every public platform possible to spread false claims to the contrary, enough so

that too many are confused, and too many have become convinced that the science is flawed, and too many have decided they are more comfortable taking their chances, forgetting that we are in a corporate fight against a transmissible, airborne disease that cares very little about personal preference and even less about personal freedom.

Without minimizing that danger, I am grateful that as a result, more and more people are speaking up, reminding us that when it comes to expertise versus opinion, the evidence of science versus the debate of the internet, not all words are created equal. They are challenging us to consider not just the content of what we see and read and hear, but the source and the motivation behind it.

Because like James says, words shape our behavior. Words are shaping our behavior.

And James isn't the only one who says this. Luther wrote him off as having nothing of the gospel in him, but the gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus called to the crowds around him and said, "Listen and understand me. It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person. It is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

But the other thing Luther missed in his critique is that the scripture, and the gospels in particular, are chock-full of powerful, creative words, strong words that make life flourish for all who hear them.

God spoke, and that's when creation danced into existence. The Son of God came to us as the Word Incarnate, full of grace and truth. To the little girl who had died, Jesus said, "Little girl, get up!" and she did. To the man who couldn't walk, Jesus said, "Take up your mat and walk." To his friend Lazarus, dead in the tomb three days, Jesus said, "Come out." To the disciples who were afraid, Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." To the thief on the cross, Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." In his last moment, with his last breath, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." And in the

garden, early on Easter morning, Jesus said, "Mary!" making resurrection real to each one of us.

Without question, words can cause us all sorts of trouble. But without question, words can also beat back the darkness and lead us into the light.

My friend Sarah is a pastor of a funky little Presbyterian church in Tacoma, WA. I have had the privilege of preaching there a few times, so I have gotten to know some of their members. Tony and Janel have been married "a good long while," as they tell it. Tony has advanced ALS. He's a quadriplegic and is on a ventilator with a trach at all times. When he wishes to speak, someone has to wheel him to a computer that reads the movements of his one good eye as he spells out, letter by letter, what he wants to say.

Janel has been his voice for several years now. But Janel was recently diagnosed with Stage 4 oral cancer. And that cancer has robbed her of the ability to speak, as well. They have had to get creative. Janel uses a white board. Tony uses his computer. Communication between them is nearly impossible. It is mind-numbingly slow. It is difficult. It is fraught with errors. And, Janel says, it is worth it. Every shared word is a victory. Every misstep is a chance for grace. She says when it takes 10 minutes to exchange a simple greeting, you learn to say only what is essential. Over time, she says, you learn to forgive a lot of things. Over time, she says, you'd be surprised how much you can still learn about each other. And over time, she says, you learn that the only words worth saying are the words that point toward love.

I don't know about you, but that sounds a lot like the gospel to me.