

**“Live What You Rap About”**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Proper 19, Year B  
*James 3:1-12*

Dr. Chris Burton

Peace, friends. It is so good to be with you all. I pray you have enjoyed the summer. Summer time used to mean so much to me as a kid and surprisingly a lot to me when I was a schoolteacher. I remember one summer meeting up with a friend from elementary school. She was preparing for the armed forces standardized test. In the midst of tutoring her, we started to talk about an elementary school teacher we had. And as I listened to my friend share about the difficult relationship she had with that teacher, I could tell that her pain from all those years ago was still a part of her life as if the unkind words were uttered by our teacher mere days ago instead of decades ago. I have thought a good deal about the pain we can inflict on one another with our words. The summer of 2020 I was an administrator at a boarding school. My role was leading the school's efforts on equity and inclusion. That summer I spent my days speaking with members of the school community as I set out to implement my office's plan for the school. I'll never forget speaking to older alums who spoke about the pain of their experiences as if it had just happened. The trauma they shared, the lion share of it, was about being treated with less than their God given dignity. The unkind words aimed at them by people who were charged to nurture, charged to uplift, protect, were words that lived as an anchor in their soul. Words that left them incomplete wanting to be made whole. It's no wonder that in our scripture today, James cautions his audience about becoming a teacher. The scripture asserts that teachers will be judged by a higher standard. And no doubt, we see how true this is in our own time and space. Teachers are charged with the destiny of a nation's most precious asset, the children. I was

asked, just yesterday, why anyone would ever want to be a teacher. I shared that the thing that gave me most joy in the classroom was the journey of having a student who went from not knowing or maybe even thinking they were not capable of knowing about a subject and seeing their knowledge mature throughout the duration of the class in a way that demonstrated increased proficiency and a deepened curiosity. When I experienced that, as a teacher, it is the transfer of a precious currency. A labor in which I am honored to co-labor with God and create. This morning I want us to think about our words and the worlds we build or destroy through communication. Are you cocreating with God or are you building prisons and snares for your neighbors? Our words have the power to build and they have the power to destroy. The power to speak life and the power to kill, lives in the tongue.

Everyday our words give us sacred opportunities. Opportunities to leave the world better than we first encountered. Yet, we stumble. We fall short. We leave the opportunity wasted or worse perverse the opportunity to build and create a moment of destruction. Destruction that lives far beyond the moment and breeds further destruction. These moments of destruction create societal dissonance. The people we thought would protect us are harming us. The ones who are supposed to love us are the ones who hate. For some time, I've shared a deep concern over the public relations disaster Christianity is experiencing. A crisis succinctly demonstrated by an Indian philosopher, Bara Dara, who once observed, "Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians...you are not like him." Scripture tells us "they will know we are Christians by our love" yet our words betray this identity. They betray Christ. Instead of love being our signature, we have chosen indifference. We have chosen navel gazing. We have chosen a feigned ignorance tantamount to eating a buffet in front of people who are starving. Our words, these engines of possibility that inspire actions, habits, and have world making potential encoded in every syllable

need to resonate with God's words. And what does God say? "You are mine. You belong to me. Don't worry. Trust me." We have no authority to say words that oppose those sacred words. No authority to make our problems bigger than the solutions. No authority to speak rejection where God has spoken belonging. No authority to speak fear when God has spoken faith. We can try to pretty it up if we want to. We can call it being authentic or honest or being real but friends what good is truth if it is unloving? And if God said don't worry, what is realer than God?

The beautiful irony of our scripture today is that while James cautions us about becoming teachers, all of us are teaching somebody something every single day. If I tell you something in confidence and you share it elsewhere, you have taught me that you are not trustworthy. If I ask you for time to talk or to ask you a question and you respond "What is it now?" You have taught me that coming to you in times of crisis is not ideal. If you see me and the first words out of your mouth are an insult, you have taught me to be guarded around you. Every one of us, regardless of social location, have the opportunity to teach somebody something today. So why not use this sacred privilege, this preferred office, as an opportunity to create a more beautiful world? What would it cost us to acknowledge one another's humanity? To match eye contact and a smile with a pleasant word? To hear our neighbor's crisis and bring words of encouragement? To nurture a child's excitement about a particular subject with the sort of conversation that deepens curiosity and expands galaxies of possibilities? I know we are in a time where the price of everything seems to only increase but last time that I checked, a kind word is still free. And you may hear this and confess that there are times where you simply do not know what to say. And I will admit that there are times when I have been asked a question or encountered a circumstance that left me speechless. I want to encourage you to make it a part of your rhythms to ask the Holy Spirit to simply give you the words. I want you to make it a habit in your prayers to ask God for the

words you need that day. It has been said that no idea is original. We have all had the experience of an incoming thought that slips through the mind's cracks or matures from an idea into an action. What would it look like for you to submit control of your words to God, letting the Lord guide your mind, thoughts, words, and actions? Our words must be tamed, what better authority than the One who made us all, guiding our words?

I am so grateful for the invitational way that James says "We all stumble in many ways." He doesn't say "y'all stumble a lot!" Or "some of you need to step it up." There is something beautiful in the humility of a teacher to show the student "this problem does not make you outside of the group. It is a problem that affects us all." This word stumble, in the greek *ptaio*, is used in Jude's letter that is often quoted in benedictions "to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling." I really like the imagery of this word because it illustrates our faith journey so well. You are not necessarily making a mess all over the place, unable to progress at all, but you may have interruptions to the progress. You may have a long span of time where your words bring life, co-create with God, and then boom you say something hurtful. Somebody cuts you off on the highway. You were trying to be amusing but you said something unkind. In and of our own selves, in our own strength, we cannot be perfect. Perfection is a weight under which our very knees buckle. It is a price we cannot afford on our own. But thanks be to God, I know somebody who is a shield around me and the lifter of my head. Thanks be to God, I know someone who is able to keep me from stumbling, keep me from harming folks, keep me from keeping folks out because of what I say. The burden of minding our words is heavy, but the good news I came to share with you today is that you don't have to carry it by yourself!

Jesus promises us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. We spend so much time trying to do it in our own strength. We reduce our journey with Christ into an intellectual

exercise. We compartmentalize our lives as if how we treat people is somehow separate from our confessions. What good are our words if they do not resonate with our actions? If we call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ, and have little interest in demonstrating Christlike behavior. It cannot just live in the realm of ideas. It has to be spoken, it has to be lived out, that's what separates a practitioner from a pretender.

It is easy for us to sit on the sidelines of crisis and talk about all the problems in the world. There is a shallow positivity that can seduce us in the midst of crisis, calling us to speak about things of little consequence so that nothing we say is offensive. Consequently, we say nothing of great impact. The difficult yet necessary work lives in our speaking about the solutions. We were never called to be merely polite. We are not called to live lives of no consequence. Every conversation is an opportunity for impact. Opportunity to provide someone a respite from calamity, an opportunity for hope to effervesce from your words into another person's circumstances. What are we saying about God if we have a multitude of words for life's problems but our words for solutions are paltry?

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark! This very building that we inhabit at one point was mere words. The opportunities we have in life, the experiences we enjoy, the help we have received and meted out; all at one point were merely words uttered. Imagine the world we can create if we take this responsibility seriously? Speaking life intentionally. Letting the words be an extension of the good habit of spending time with God. Using our words build tables to break bread on not walls to further divide us. Words that restore and repair our society. Words that apologize and catalyze justice and righteousness. Words that surprise us with mercy and goodness. Words that give us joy when we thought all was lost. The emphasis on words is that we are an amalgamation of reactions. Something encountering

something. Only God is self sufficient and we see even God chooses to dwell with us. This immanence, mastered by the One who made us all, is a divine characteristic. As we become more like Christ, our appreciation of community deepens. God made us for community. We need to employ our words to strengthen the connective tissue of our community. Lord knows, disunity does not need help. My prayer for all of us is that we know when to speak, that we seek the Holy Spirit for the right words to say at the right time, and we value active listening. Silence that is skillfully employed so that it prioritizes community and never creates isolation. I'm forever moved by the words of the great Hezekiah Walker who once sang, "I pray for you, you pray for me. I love you, I need you to survive! I won't harm you with words from my mouth, I love you, I need you to survive." Friends there is too much harm in this world. Too much brokenness and fissures. May we hold each other together. Don't ignore the breaks, don't live willfully ignorant of the breaks. Investigate the breaks, educate yourself on the breaks, listen to those whom the breaks have harmed. It is only then that we can be sure that we are living into our purpose. Co-Creators with the Creator. Repairing this world, loving one another, taking the prayer that our Savior taught us seriously, making things on Earth as they are in Heaven. God bless you, God keep you, Amen.

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