

Words and Wisdom

August 30, 2009 • Back to School Sunday

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Psalm 19; James 3:1-18

Most of us were aware that this past week was back to school week for students, teachers and all other school personnel. We heard the school buses rumble through our streets once again on Monday or Tuesday morning. If we were out for an early morning walk, we might have seen our neighborhood children, waiting for the bus. Some looking anxious, others talking with their friends, many comparing new shoes, brightly colored shorts and shiny backpacks.

For weeks, even months, all of us have been bombarded with back to school ads, making sure we knew where in the community to shop for the best deals. A detail especially important for many families with the present economic situation. Teachers prepared their rooms, decorated bulletin boards, assembled lesson plans, created space that would be welcoming to all. For parents, teachers and students, back to school means gearing up physically and emotionally for some change. It might include earlier bedtime, a different daily rhythm, packing lunches, and even an annual ritual of taking a photo on the first day of school.

Even our local newspaper had an article on the front page on two consecutive days related to back to school. “*Miss Hartman Goes to School: First-time schoolteacher survives her first day.*” This 28-year-old full-time teacher gave up working as a biologist doing research on pygmy rabbits in the desert to teach 17 second graders at Spotswood Elementary. She confessed that not only are children a bit jittery on the first day of school, but so are the teachers. Giving up research and rabbits must have been the right choice for her. She admitted, “*when I’m with students, my life is not empty.*”

The next day a delightful photo captured the pure joy and wonder of a 5 year old girl on her first day of kindergarten. It was placed next to the article, “*Don’t worry, mom: county’s first day of school’s tough....on the parents*”. Seeing your first child, last child or maybe only child, going off to school for the first time can bring a tear or two, a lump in the throat, along with the realization of how quickly time passes. The words

of the principal of the new River Bend Elementary school expressed well the general mood, “*We’re all a little excited, a little nervous and a little happy. It’s a good day.*”

Back to school time acknowledges that summer is coming to a close, fall is rapidly approaching, even if temperatures are still in the 80s. We turn the page and begin a new chapter. We paint the canvas of our minds with rust, gold, orange, deep yellow, earthy tones and hues. Gone are the pastels of early spring and summer. We return...to classroom, to lecture hall, to lab,... to study, to compose, to research, to write, to critique and analyze. If we are students, we **hope** it will be a good year, that we will like our teachers, that we can be with our friends or make some new ones. If we are teachers, we **hope** it will be a good year, that our students will want to study, to learn, and to explore, and that the trouble makers and especially challenging students will be in someone else’s room, or that God will give us the grace and patience to deal with the ones who may be in our classroom. If we are administrators and staff, we **hope** it will be a good year, with few personnel issues, no scandals, please no scandals, and enough money to get through another year.

And so we hunker down, put on our school shoes, grab our backpack, and enter the classroom for another year of teaching and learning.

On Tuesday, Ross, Judy and I met to plan for today’s worship service. Judy came into my office with a bright smile and exclaimed, “*Well, I made it through the first day of classes.*” That was a good sign, I thought, coming from a teacher. Then I proceeded to tell her that the passage of scripture that I was going to use today from James 3, begins with these words (from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*): “*Don’t be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths.*”

That might not have been the wisest thing to say, at that moment. Actually I think I stopped reading after the first sentence, “*Don’t be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends.*” (or CEV states: “My friends, we should not all try to become teachers.”) as if that is going to happen. But there it is. Now what is that all about.

The small book of James in the NT, just 5 short chapters, is a unique book. It is a general letter addressed to Christians who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. The book is primarily a collection of practical instructions for daily living. They are short, clear and to the point. Because these exhortations are not connected explicitly to a christological foundation, the book is considered by some to be inferior to other books in the canon, holding a somewhat secondary status. This attitude was held in particular by Martin Luther, who called James, an “epistle of straw”. But if we allow the writer of James to write in his own way and speak his own mind for the intended purpose of conveying short, clear statements of how Christians should live, then we can appreciate and learn from this book without putting something more on it than is appropriate. James assumes certain things and then moves directly into the moral teaching itself. What he writes is helpful for all Christians who believe but do not always act in the best way. James understands that Christian communities, unfortunately, are not always model communities of good behavior. Often they are places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced and dealt with.

What can we learn from this book with its down to earth teaching? especially chapter 3?

Probably the most well known passage from James comes immediately before chapter 3. James 2:26: Faith apart from works is dead, or as the CEV states: “*Anyone who doesn’t breathe is dead, and faith that doesn’t do anything is just as dead!*”

The opening of chapter 3 is a new subject without much transition. The main point of the first 5 verses is the need to control the tongue (and if written today, James might add, and control what you write in your e mail!!) But what about the part regarding teachers. Surely teachers were needed to instruct members of the church in NT times, but apparently there was the tendency for persons to appoint themselves as teachers, and then to give advice to others. The writer is giving a cautionary word that not all people are qualified to teach, but if you are called, remember the standards are high. The responsibility is great. You will be judged more strictly than others.

Control the tongue, and if you can achieve that, you are more likely

to be able to control the rest of the body, revealing yourself to be a mature person, a more complete and whole individual. Surely that is good advice for all of us, not just for teachers!!!

All of us do and say many wrong things. We make mistakes. Our words sometimes hurt people. We are all guilty. Sometimes we are on the receiving end. We know what it feels like. Sometimes we are the guilty ones, wishing so much that we could take back that word, comment or remark that slipped from our mouth. Or putting it into today’s text, how many of us wish we hadn’t sent an e mail that contained some hurtful, damaging, accusing remarks? As soon as we hit SEND, we wish we hadn’t.

James writes, “Our tongues are so small, yet they brag about big things.” They often get us into trouble!

He gives two examples that would be familiar to people of that time. The first dealing with the small bridle or bit put into a horse’s mouth. So small, yet the rider can turn the horse in different directions simply by maneuvering that tiny bit. The small rudder on a large ship, in the same way, guides the direction of the vessel at the will of the captain. Small things, yet they have a lot of power. By controlling that one small part, the direction of the whole thing is controlled.

James writes, “the tongue is like a spark! It can start a whole forest on fire.”

We can tame all kinds of things....animals, birds, sea creatures (think dolphins at Sea World, elephants at the circus), but our tongues get out of control! They are restless and evil and can spread deadly poison.”

But the irony and contradiction in all of this, as he goes on to say, (vs. 9-10) is that with our tongues we also praise! What a wonderful gift that is. We praise our Lord and Father, but we also curse people who are created in God’s image. **And this isn’t right! This can’t go on! that is allowing our tongues to be out of control.**

And so the instruction, the warning, the admonition is that we must learn to control the tongue, and by so doing that, we also learn to control the

whole person.

The second part of chapter 3 deals with wisdom, another important quality that we desire for teachers/educators, but really for all of us. If we are wise and sensible people and have wisdom, then we should be living right, that is our patterns of life should show evidence of humility, kindness, gentleness, sincerity. For James, wisdom is a gift from God. It is not something that one can achieve by our own efforts. True wisdom is a divine gift. We pray for wisdom. We don't work to somehow achieve wisdom. Earthly wisdom is selfish and self-centered and jealous. That kind of wisdom doesn't come from above.

vs. 17 states:, *“But the wisdom that comes from above leads us to be pure, friendly, gentle, sensible, kind, helpful, genuine, and sincere.”*

As another school year begins, let us pray for wisdom from above, that God will grant the gift of wisdom to our teachers, staff/administrators, but also wisdom for each of us, pastors, parents, business people, medical personnel. May each of us work at controlling our tongue, so that what comes forth out of our mouth will honor God, will build up people, not tear them down, that will encourage another, not discourage. May we learn to praise and affirm, to speak the truth, yes, but in love, with a gentle spirit, not with harsh accusations.

This congregation has a long history of valuing and supporting education at all levels, in the public and private institutions. Our ties are strong. We want and desire for our children a good education, but our hearts also ache when we realize that many children have so little. Maybe that is why there was so much excitement and enthusiasm a few weeks ago when many of you showed up early to assemble and pack up 1000 school kits for MCC. Just imagine the faces of over 1000 little children in some of the poorest places in the world receiving one of those kits, opening it up and maybe for the first time in their life, having their very own notebook and ruler and pencils. And most likely those kits will be stretched further and be divided among several children.

46% of girls in the world's poorest countries have no access to primary education.

More than 1 in 4 adults cannot read or write. 2/3 of these are women.

(info from CROP Walk material, p. 6 of Hunger Activities booklet)

Nelson Mandela said, *“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”*

Laura Helmuth is one of our young teachers, facing the challenge of teaching a second grade in an inner city school in Baltimore, MD, where 98% of her students are from families that fall below the poverty level. Her classroom needs books. Her school library needs books. Just maybe we can glean a few books from our shelves, pick up a few extra at the book fair and help Laura fill those shelves.

May God grant wisdom to us all. May God grant courage and strength to control our tongues so that what we say and the patterns of our living will be pleasing to God.

“May these words of my mouth and this mediation of my heart, be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Psalm 19:14