

“Fresh Water”
James 3:1-12
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
7.18.21
Sermon #107

James 3:1-12 (CEB)

3 My siblings, not many of you should become teachers, because we know that we teachers will be judged more strictly. ²We all make mistakes often, but those who don't make mistakes with their words have reached full maturity. Like a bridled horse, they can control themselves entirely. ³When we bridle horses and put bits in their mouths to lead them wherever we want, we can control their whole bodies.

⁴Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a

little rudder. ⁵ In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly.

Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. ⁶ The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell.

⁷ People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. ⁸ No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My siblings, it just shouldn't be this way!

¹¹ Both fresh water and salt water don't come from the same spring, do they?¹² My siblings, can a fig tree produce olives? Can a

grapevine produce figs? Of course not, and fresh water doesn't flow from a saltwater spring either.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks Be to God.**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

These last couple of weeks in James have taken us on a fascinating journey. To help us remember what is going on, the community James is addressing is a community of Jewish Christians living in a land full of Jews. Think Jerusalem. The author of James is concerned with observing the Law not because it saves, but because it is part of their identity as Jews who are Christians.

James emphasizes Jesus as Teacher versus Redeemer. And at the heart of James, the question is “Why do people call Jesus Lord, yet do not do what Christ calls them to do?”

In James 1, we can recall that God is the Father and Creator of all that is. God is the Master Gardener. And our souls are planted because of God’s Word. And we are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. We have a responsibility to tend to our souls the way Christ himself has taught us.

Last week, we were in James 2. It expands upon the words of James 1. And we discovered last week that God, who is also the Lawgiver, gives us a law that frees us to serve out of love. And serving out of love means serving our neighbors. Our neighbors who not only look and act like us, but who also come from

backgrounds that our not like our own. We are also not to show favoritism to the rich, but, like God, be concerned with those who come from the margins because God is a God of the outcast, the poor, and the oppressed.

Today, James 3:1-12 continues the connecting threads we have traced the last couple of weeks. Scot McKnight, a commentator, points out that James 3 follows a particular flow.¹ We have a warning in the first two verses. This warning says: “Hey! Not all of you are to become teachers because you can’t choose your words wisely! You’ll do more damage with your speech if you can’t learn to control what you say!”.

Then, James gives us some examples: Bridled horses are controlled by something that seems so insignificant. Massive ships

¹ Scott Mcknight. *The Letter of James*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011.

are directed by something so small as a rudder. And while the tongue is small, it can do good or damage. So, James invites us as readers to take heed of these images.

James continues to say that the tongue is like a spark. Just like a spark can set a whole forest on fire! Furthermore, while people can train various kinds of animals, as is stated in verse 7, no one can tame the tongue! James calls the tongue a “restless evil, full of deadly poison”. And yet, with our words, we are told in verse 9 that we will bless the LORD one moment and turn around and curse our fellow human beings the next moment.

Verses 11-12 pose several questions to us as readers and listeners of this epistle. Can both fresh and salt water come out of the same spring? Can fig trees produce olives? Can grapevines produce figs?

These aren't trick questions. Out of a spring, you get one type of water. Fig trees produce figs. Grapevines produce grapes. A person who blesses the LORD one minute and curses someone else the next is the kind of person James denounces and is actually full of poison.

What James 3 boils down to is ethics! Ethics, according to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, is the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.

We talk about people's work ethic. We talk about a person's moral compass. Or we will say: "She is a good woman" or "He is not to be trusted". Whatever language we use, we notice a person's ethics. Or lack thereof.

James does the hard job of calling out what many of us are guilty of doing. Trying to have it both ways! One moment, we worship and give praise to God. And then, like I do often, get angry with someone simply because the person in the car in front of me is driving ten under the speed limit.

James, especially chapter 3, is based on a love of neighbor. Now, remember that this is a Jewish Christian community. They are steeped in the Torah. Especially Deut 6.4-5 and Lev. 19.18 which tell us to love the LORD our God with all our heart, mind, and strength. And to love our neighbor as ourselves. And to not hold grudges against our neighbors!

As God, who is the creator of all that is, has given birth to us with a Word, has also called us to serve our neighbors out of love. We

are to behave as God's beloved children. We are to love each other and love ourselves!

Maybe you have noticed, but James is addressed to teachers. So, that takes us off the hook, right? We can act anyway we want to, right? We don't need to worry about how we speak to one another, right? Absolutely not!!!!

You see, our lives are teachable moments for everyone we come across. For many we come in contact with every day, their only exposure of Christianity may in fact rest on what they learn from us. Sure, early in James 3 it addresses teachers, but then everyone....."siblings" are addressed.

James 3 speaks to those who are literal teachers as well as those who teach with their whole lives and beings. It calls out those who

preach every week behind the pulpit as well as those who preach with their words and actions in everyday life. Our words and actions teach. Our words and actions are a sermon.

James says that we can't have it both ways. Our words will either be full of poison or healing. Cursing or blessing.

Back in the Fall of 2018, Union Presbyterian Seminary celebrated the life of the Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon. Dr. Cannon was Union's Christian Ethics professor. I was in her class in the Spring of 2018, which turned out to be the last time she would teach Introduction to Christian Ethics. Dr. Cannon was diagnosed with Leukemia in early June and died about two months later.

Dr. Cannon was a remarkable person. She was the first African American woman to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church, which

happened in 1974. She received a PhD in Christian Ethics in the early 1980s and was a force of positive change. Growing up in the Jim Crow South, the same people who worshipped the LORD on Sunday mornings would be the same people who cursed her for being Black. These people who fought for the evil of segregation were trying to have it both ways. Instead, they were full of poison. For Dr. Cannon, these experiences pushed her to be a force for change in the church.

At Dr. Katie Cannon's memorial service, one of her students talked a little about our late professor's life. She likened Dr. Cannon's life to a tree. It would positively impact everything it touched or touched it. It had its own mini-ecosystem. And that struck me as I prepared for today's sermon.

James 3 tells us that our lives are these small ecosystems. They affect everything and everyone they come in contact with. You can think of it like a tree, but as I have meditated on that image, I prefer a pond. You know those ponds that are in people's back yards?

The couple I lived with several years ago have a pond with a fountain. So, the water is constantly moving. There are adult gold fish and guppies! Frogs like to hang out next to it to feast on mosquitos. Birds play in the fountain. Plants thrive next to it. This pond is a home. The pond provides respite for the weary. It also creates an oasis on those hot, dry, summer days. While this particular pond and fountain are human made, plenty of God's creatures take up residence there or are planted nearby. It blesses the area immediately surrounding it. It adds to the already diverse community given to us by God.

And like that pond, our lives are to be a blessing. Like Dr. Cannon's life, are lives are to be a force for change that benefits all not just for a select few. As James tells us, our words are to bless and not curse. Everything we do, someone is always watching our actions. Everything we say, someone is listening to our words. James is addressing us as teachers. And we are called to live our lives as teachable moments and sermons to everyone we meet.

Beloved in Christ, trust this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.