

I think we have all heard the saying, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” We say this, and yet it simply is not true. Some of the worst damage someone can cause us emotionally and spiritually is through their words. I am sure all of us can think of an example from our own lives of when we experienced harmful words that we can still recall today. Harsh words are like stones because they can chip away at our identity, at our understanding of others, and even our understanding of God. I think this is why James shares this warning about the words we say from James 3:5-9:

“⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And 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. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

This certainly is a warning about carefully choosing the words we say and the impact they can have on other people.

On this, the last Sunday of our “Blessed: Beatitudes Sermon Series” we lift up these words from Matthew 5:11-12: “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

This past week at General Conference, our delegates experienced this beatitude first-hand. They experienced protestors out on the street with signs calling them “Pharisees” and telling them they would be going to hell. Delegates on the floor spoke insulting words to one another as people from both sides passionately argued which plan should be adopted. It was not a good day to be a United Methodist.

As you may know, news outlets from all over the world picked up the story and now people are weighing in on the decision that was made. The delegates voted to adopt the “Traditional Plan” in which the United Methodist “Book of Discipline” does not change and more strict actions were put into place to hold clergy and the episcopacy accountable for violating our stance on homosexuality.

After General Conference was over clergy and laity took to the internet to share their opinions. There was rejoicing and mourning from both sides. Again, insults flew back and forth.

This is not the people God has called us to be. We are called to use our words to worship God and love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Today I am thankful that we serve a God who offers us forgiveness.

In our Scripture from Genesis today we come into the story of Joseph and his brothers. What we didn't read is how Joseph's brothers were so jealous of him and the favoritism his father bestowed upon him that they threw him in a pit and sold him into slavery. Much time had passed since this moment and now Joseph, by the grace of God, had risen to a position of power in which he had the ability to determine his brothers' fate.

When his brothers came beg for food, they did not even recognize their brother. Jacob had a decision to make...should he offer his brothers forgiveness and preserve their lives, or should he seek revenge? He chose to offer them forgiveness and embodied God's saving action of grace in their lives.

Like Joseph, we often have two feelings warring within us: love and hate. We hate what is evil. We hate those who cause harm to us and the people we love and care about. It is a lot easier to be consumed by the feeling of hate, than the feeling of love. When we are consumed by hate, there is no room for God's love to dwell within us. So, we must let go of our hatred and anger so that we can make more room for the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts.

We jump to hatred, because we first jump to judgement. We jump to judgement before we spend the time getting to know other people. We often do not give people the benefit of the doubt because we are afraid...afraid people are trying to take something from us or take advantage of us. We keep people at a distance, until we can judge that they are safe.

And yet, in Luke 6 Jesus tells us to “love our enemies” to “pray for those who persecute us” and to “pray for those who abuse us” (Luke 6:27-28). This is not our first response in our humanity, and yet it is the life that Jesus calls us to live.

When we love our enemies, we take away their power to hurt us. This is why the feeling of hate is so dangerous. It is a feeling that consumes us, and like Jacob's brothers experienced, it leaves us unable to recognize that the other person is still a child of God.

When we pray for those who persecute us and insult us, we recognize that we cannot control the actions of other people. When we pray for those who abuse us, we recognize that no amount of abuse we may suffer can take away our identity in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commentary says it this way: “...the character of God dictates that we practice love that is not limited by others’ responses to us...”ⁱ We cannot control what other people say or do to us, but we can control ourselves and our response to God who is calling us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Again, in this Scripture we hear Christ’s call to mercy, because we serve a God who is merciful.

So how does this play out in our lives today?

If we are honest, I think it is safe to say that we all experience moments of judgement and hatred in our lives. In our humanity, we get upset when life does not go the way that we intended. We are looking for someone to blame, and so these feelings come out as judgement and hatred. These are also the ways we respond to other people who hurt us.

While others should be held accountable for their actions in which they are not loving of their neighbors, we are called to seek God’s wisdom as we respond to all people so we can recognize each one of them as a child of God.

Being a Christian is hard and not for the faint of heart. Practicing our faith requires hard work, determination, self-awareness, restraint, and a lot of grace. God is the one who continues to strengthen us to do the work of God, so when we are in these moments where we cannot control our emotions, we must call upon God to help us, to offer us peace, and to continue to offer us hope and in these moments of despair, we need God to tell us that this is not the end of our story.

Joseph could have let his brothers die, but he offered them life. Through his death on the cross and his resurrection, Jesus Christ offers us forgiveness over and over and over again. We do not always make the best decisions as we are choosing our words, this is why we monthly have our prayer of confession as we approach the Communion table:

“We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart, we have failed to be an obedient church, we have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love and we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves...forgive us we pray...” (UMH P. 12).

We confess because we are imperfect, we ask for forgiveness and God in God’s mercy bestows it upon us. This is how we can continue to “rejoice and be glad” as Jesus said in Matthew 5. When we experience insults from others as we are practicing our faith, we are called to think about the many faithful Christians who have been before us and experienced much worse.

Then we are called to remember that rocks have been used all throughout Christian history to build up the kingdom of God and not tear it down. In the Old Testament Moses hit a rock and water sprang forth to provide life for the Israelites. The people of God built altars out of rocks to commemorate an experience with God.

In the New Testament, it was a rock removed from its original place, that told us that Christ had risen. Our understanding of rocks became an embodied of our faith. We hear that Jesus Christ is our “cornerstone” that Peter has been chosen to be the “rock of the church” and that we also are called to be “living stones” as we are “built into a spiritual house for God” as we are built into the body of Christ, the church.

So maybe it is not true that sticks and stone can break our bones. What is true is that no matter what happens to us in this life, if we surrender our lives to God, we can continue to build upon the rocks that have been laid by the faithful so many years ago.

The good news for our lives today is that Christ is the cornerstone, the rock upon which the church hinges. So even when we insult one another and behave badly, even when our God-given identity is chipped away by insults, the church will remain through our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, if you are hurting today for whatever reason, if you feel that life is chipping away at your hope, know that God is with you. Think of all of those who came before you to get you where you are today. Look around this church and “rejoice and be glad” because in the act of Holy Communion God’s table is also extended to the saints that have gone before us.

This table, which is made out of sticks and stones, is the place we are thankful for Christ’s sacrifice so that we could be forgiven. This table is a place that continues to offer us life and not death. May we continue to live as forgiven and reconciled people as we forgive each other and offer one another mercy.

May we continue to let go of our hatred and embrace the love that has been freely offered to us. May we continue to choose Jesus Christ, the rock of our salvation. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Keck et al. *New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary*. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 147.