

James 3:1-12
Sept 13, 2009

South Plains

It Only Takes A Spark

The chair of our Christian Education Committee, Lyn Johnson, may want to shoot me for choosing this text from James 3. Lyn and her committee have been working hard over the past months to insure that every Sunday School class has not just one, but at least two teachers from the cradle roll to the adult class. Good teachers are hard to recruit; and I know that South Plains is blessed to have excellent teachers. So it may seem contrary of me to read from James 3:1 that “Not many of you should become teachers, brothers and sisters.”

My purpose this morning, however, is not to discourage anyone from teaching, but to celebrate teachers and to thank them because the book of James tells us clearly why good teachers are difficult to recruit in church. Listen to the whole of that verse: “Not many of you should become teachers, brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” All too well we feel the weight of responsibility that falls upon anyone who accepts the job of teaching in the church.

Teachers are held to a higher standard in general. I suspect that teachers in church hold themselves to a much higher standard. Who wants to take the risk of causing a little one to stumble with the words of Jesus

ringing in our ears: “But if anyone causes one of these **little ones** who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matt 18:5)

I wanted to quote Jesus himself at this point because Jesus is over the top when he talks about the influence we have on other people. Listen to what he says about keeping the letter of the law:

Therefore whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:19).

That's exactly why he was so hard on the scribes and Pharisees – they were teachers and supposedly models of religiosity.

But, remember what was the real fault of the scribes and Pharisees: they could not see themselves as sinners. They refused to acknowledge their need for forgiveness. They were proud hypocrites like the man in Jesus' parable who prayed in the temple:

God, I thank you I am not like other people.
(Luke 18:11)

That's the terrible temptation of teachers, and preachers too for that matter, to think of ourselves as better because we are teaching, smarter because we lecture and preach, or even, God forbid, morally superior because we are in a position to offer advice and direction to other people.

The author of James knew very well that the church must have teachers, and yet he knew the church will never find teachers who are perfect. He goes on to say, "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect," but he has no illusions about finding perfect teachers. We think the book of James was written for the second generation of Christians when the Apostles and others who knew Jesus first-hand were passing quickly from the scene. The challenge for the church was to spread the gospel without diluting its message, to instruct new converts who would hear the stories of Jesus firsthand, to make disciples not only of Jews steeped in the scriptures, but also of Gentiles who came from pagan and idolatrous religions. Teachers were a necessity. The young church needed the best teachers just as we do today.

Today's church is no different from the second generation church of the New Testament in one important respect. We cannot recruit perfect teachers. We must depend upon imperfect teachers who will grow in their ability, increase their knowledge, and become what the word "Christian" implies. A person who is a Christian is by definition Christ-like, or at least someone trying to follow in the footsteps of the Master teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. The great reformer, Martin Luther, called us "little Christs" in the world. The letter to the Corinthians calls us "ambassadors for Christ," in other words we are representatives or stand-ins for Christ.

In that sense, anyone who identifies with Christianity and accepts the adjective "Christian" becomes a teacher, an example of the kind of person Jesus is teaching us to become. In that spirit, this passage immediately broadens its intended audience from formal teachers to anyone who speaks and communicates. I won't rehearse all the metaphors that James uses to describe the way our tongues can influence people.

When James compares the tongue to a small fire that can burn down a forest, I thought immediately of the wildfires in California. When I lived in Pasadena, I hiked and ran those Mount Wilson Observatory trails where the wildfire burns today. The raw hillsides are steep and support only dense brush that becomes tinder-dry for most of the year. Authorities believe the so-called Station Fire was arson. When they find the person who set that fire, they will probably charge him or her with the murder of two fire fighters and the destruction of millions of dollars in property. It only takes a spark. That's the danger of musing words so that they hurt and malign and slander another person. Just a few words can become a wildfire of lies or a firestorm of misinformation. The way we use our tongues and voices will have profound consequences. On the other hand, "it only takes a spark" to kindle love. You may know the old camp song, "Pass It On."

It only takes a spark, to get a fire going.
And soon all those around, can warm up in it's glowing.

Chorus:

That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it, it's fresh like spring, you want to sing, you want to pass it on.

The tongue is a spark that can either warm hearts or blister and burn those hearts. I don't worry as much about teachers who lack knowledge as about those who lack love. We have good curriculum materials and a number of people in our congregation who are available to answer questions and guide a teacher who needs help. Knowledge can be taught and learned rather easily. But, love, the quintessential component of great teaching, that compassion that creates a comfort zone for learners, that readiness to share, that kindness sending the message that you can ask anything and be respected, that love can only be communicated virally. Great educators say Christian faith can't be taught, it can only be caught. One person who is infected with the gospel in their whole lives will pass on God's love almost without trying.

But, of course, we will have to try. We have to teach. We want to hold ourselves accountable to scripture. We know that what matters in the end is the Spirit of Jesus, a Spirit that depends upon the parables he taught and the healing stories he enacted, and especially upon the central story of the One who gave his life for us. The best teaching aid we have is the Bible. So, we tell the gospel about Jesus' life. We use the early church as our example of both how to follow Jesus and

how to avoid miss-steps and errors. We read the letters that kept Christians on track 2000 years ago. And, we puzzle over the book of Revelation as we hope for God's ultimate triumph that vanquishes evil in the world.

We live in a time when everyone can be a teacher. The phenomenon of blogging begins with the assumption that everyone has something worth saying and somebody will read it on the internet. We also live in a time when self-restraint is a lost virtue, when even people in positions of influence believe they can say what they please as long as they are passionate about what they believe.

The church of Jesus Christ has another agenda. We want to be passionate about the gospel of Jesus, about what he believed and taught and the way he lived. That's the reason we come to Sunday School. That's the reason we monitor our speaking, not only in the classroom but everywhere. I would edit the words of our text to say, "Not many of you should become teachers at the same time, brothers and sisters. All who teach will be judged with great strictness. Therefore all should take a turn at teaching. Whether you teach in front of a class is not as critical as that you understand yourself as a walking, talking 'for instance' of what the gospel of Jesus Christ really means."

It only takes a spark, the tiniest spark of God's grace in your life will influence another life, and the warmth of God's love will get going.