

SERMON 9-12-21 Maple Grove UMC
SWEETER THAN HONEY
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SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-10 (*The Message*)

1-2 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. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life. **3-5** A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it! **5-6** It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell. **7-9** This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! **10** My friends, this can't go on.

When I chose this lectionary passage a few weeks ago, I first thought I would entitle the message, "Words Have Meaning."

I don't know how many of you are like me, but I can't ever remember experiencing such hate-filled rhetoric like that which has gripped our country. Such denigrating of one another, often shouting at one another, sometimes even threatening one another. Over race, immigration, gun control, abortion, gay marriage, climate change, mask wearing, COVID vaccinations. You know the hot-button issues.

It has split families, friend groups, work settings, and church communities. We're reading about nurses quitting. School boards members quitting. School bus drivers quitting. Teachers leaving early.

We refuse to watch TV news that doesn't line up with our own views. Gone are the Walter Cronkites. Remember how he was "the most trusted man in America," as the CBS Evening News anchorman for 19 years. Now we call journalists "the enemy of the people."

And some of the worst rhetoric is coming out of the church, even from our pastors! I have no idea why a longtime friend of mine would think I would like a YouTube video he recently sent me. It was of a Greg Locke, pastor of the Global Vision Bible Church in Mt Julie, TN. Pastor Locke was ranting while on a plane heading for Florida where he was going to be preaching at a youth retreat.

Among other things he said, "The Delta variant is nonsense! They're going for Round Two of the Liberal Lockdown." He went on to scream, "If you show up at our tent with a bunch of masks, I'm going to ask you to leave. I don't care how mad you get."

There's a sign in front of his church that reads: "Our campus is a mask free church. Either kindly remove them or sit in your car."

There was a letter to the editor this week bemoaning the state of the church where the person wrote: "I have evangelical friends and atheist friends...and I'm starting to like the atheists more."

As we try to wrap our hearts and minds around 9-11 this weekend after 20 years, we are painfully aware of how words have had real consequences. Initially our feelings of patriotism and unity with one another were unlike anything I've experienced in my lifetime. I had never seen so many people fly American flags. The Pew Report said that as many as 79% of Americans did.

I had a young mother and her two teenage sons who lived directly across the street from my Lewisburg parsonage knock on our door right after 9/11 to talk frighteningly about whether we were coming to the end of the world. The three of them started coming to church for the first time in their lives. Remember how church attendance spiked?

But that spirit of solidarity and unity didn't last. For it wasn't long before the rhetoric of fear and revenge and this thing called Islamophobia took over. It led us into two wars at an estimated cost \$6.4 trillion and over 800,000 lives lost. Anti-Muslim hate crimes increased 1,600% in the first year after 9/11, even though people from 93 countries were represented among the almost 3,000 who died that day.

You started hearing stories like the frightened little 10-year-old girl and her younger sister wearing their hijabs and running home in Brooklyn scared to death. A car had pulled up and a man spit at them and screamed, "Terrorists!"

Fourteen years after 9/11, in early September 2015, a Muslim man, Ayhan Kaklik, who lived in apartments across the road from my Bethel International UMC walked into my office. His wife was in one of our ELS classes. He wanted to ask if I might come to his Turkish mosque to talk to a group of men in their 20's about something confusing to all of them. That it seemed like Christianity worshipped three Gods. Of course, he was talking about the Trinity, a concept not easy to fully comprehend by any of us.

When my devoted and protective secretary heard about it, she pleaded with me not to go. "You could be seriously hurt, Pastor Mike. You can't take that chance!"

But a retired attorney who was in my Wednesday morning small group came to the rescue. When he heard I was going, because of his interest in world religions, he asked if he could join me. Now I was "safe" since Denny would act as my bodyguard.

So, on a Thursday early evening, Denny and I went over to TASO (Turkish American Society of Ohio) and first enjoyed a pizza supper. Then we went into a prayer room with Ayhan and about 15 young men and spent close to two hours together discussing the Trinity and some troubling issues on our part about radical Islam.

When our time came to an end, I asked if we might all pray together, not knowing exactly how to do it. I suggested that one of them pray for all of us. But they insisted I should pray, as their "honored" guest.

I don't remember exactly what I prayed, but I do remember closing with a passionate plea for our children. With my amen, I realized that I could hardly see through the tears that were pouring from my eyes.

One by one each of those fellows came up and gave me a hug. They then walked Denny and me to our car, saying that we "must do this again."

That led to a group of our church's women and some young women from TASO to begin meeting regularly as "Sisters in Faith." I preached about our coming together not long after our visit, and to my surprise the sermon went viral within the Muslim community, with feedback from as far as Chicago.

In early December of that year, Ayhan asked if he could offer what he called "Noah's Pudding," or Ashure, as a thank-you gift to our congregation. He said that he loves to give it in large quantities, to at least 200 people.

I said, "Maybe we could do that, but what in the world is Noah's Pudding?" He then told me how tradition has it that after Noah's ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat, Noah gathered anything that was available—dried fruit, nuts, grains, and the like—and cooked them to form a sweet-tasting porridge or pudding. It was given to his surviving neighbors as an offering of peace and love.

As I thought about it, I said that we have a special cantata Christmas Sunday coming up where our various worshipping communities come together, including our Korean congregation, maybe as many as 400. He said, "That would be great!"

So, on 12/20/15 at least twenty Muslim folks joined with us for Christmas music and celebration. I asked one of their men to play the Ney Flute, an ancient Turkish woodwind, dating back as far as 4500 years. I also asked one of their women, an OSU professor, to join with me in giving the benediction. Then several of them lined a table and passed out Noah's Pudding to the worshippers as they left.

Because it was Christmastime, several guests were on hand. Some of them came up to me after the service and said, "If this is the kind of church you have, I think I want to come back for more." I also had a few of my own members tell me, "Pastor, you have drunk the Muslim Kool-Aid."

Since then, I have never missed a Ramadan without being in Ayhan's home for an after-sunset, Iftar meal with other friends of his. They have joined with my wife, Diane, and me at our own home for dinner. I have prostrated myself with them at prayer time, praying my own prayer, but to the same God.

The experience is always the same. Kindness within a warm embrace exuded—the language of love. No one is trying to change the other person. Just trying to celebrate those things we hold in common and understand with appreciation that which is different. It's become God's greatest surprise gift to me in this late stage of my ministry. It has shattered many of my stereotypes.

I share these things to remind us that the volatile, tense, factional setting in which James was writing wasn't a whole lot different than ours today. There were economic problems in the Roman world of that time and there was intense in-fighting among different factions.

A few years after James wrote these words, a powder keg would be lit when the Jewish Zealots revolted against Rome in 66 AD. It was a disaster, resulting in the total collapse of Jerusalem and the destruction of Herod's temple within 4 years. Is it any wonder that one of James' primary themes of his letter was that words DO matter?

Remember verse 6 from today's reading? *"By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos...send the whole world up in smoke, and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell."*

James then goes on to say: *"With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth."*

There's an old adage that goes: "If you really want to know about a person's character, watch how that person treats the waiter at a restaurant."

Does he treat the waiter as a person, or merely as a servant? Kind words aren't meant only for friends. We're to offer them to everyone because they, like us, are made in God's image. You can't bless God and curse his image at the same time.

Knowing how words do matter, we look to Jesus as our model. Let's go for a moment to Jesus' first sermon. We know it as The Sermon on the Mount.

He starts with eight Beatitudes or beautiful attitudes, filled with beautiful words. Let's take the first couple of them. Hear the Lord's words and their tone.

From Matthew 5:3 -- *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

What does "poor in spirit" exactly mean? Listen to a different translation, the New Living Translation. *God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them."*

Or how about God's Word Translation? *"Blessed are those who recognize they are spiritually helpless. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them."*

The word "blessed" in Greek can also be translated as "happy" or even "congratulations." So, here's my favorite: *Congratulations to those who now feel empty at the very core of their being because of their need for God. They are already citizens of God's Kingdom."*

Beautiful attitudes. Beautiful words. Jesus' words. They not only draw us into the heart of God, but they bind us all together. Jesus' words are sweeter than honey.

Let's look at Matthew 5:4 -- *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."*

The word for "mourn" here means the kind of grief and agony you feel from having lost the most important person in your life. You're blessed because this kind of mourning shows the depth of your love.

The JB Phillips NT Translation puts it this way: *"Happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given courage and comfort!"*

And here's Eugene Peterson's *The Message*: *"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."*

Looking at different translations is a way the bible can speak fresh words to us, even when we've read the same passage a hundred times before.

Words do matter and Proverbs 16:24 tells us that *"Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweet to the taste and healing for the body."* We really need to believe that and practice that as Christians. The whole world is watching.

In retirement, I've stepped up my game in working with a faith-based prison ministry out of Marysville and Marion called Kindway. I didn't fully appreciate the name Kindway until preparing for this sermon.

It is a powerful, faith-based program that involves inmates 18 months prior to parole and follows them through a mentoring and halfway house component for a year after release. I've taught Bible classes at the prison primarily for lifers and have been a Navigator for a few on parole. After ten years of operation and dealing with close to 150 men and women, their success rate stands at an unheard of 98.5% (only two have returned to prison).

After they have surrendered completely to Jesus Christ, I wish you could hear their choice of words. They are filled with kindness and compassion and love, the kingdom of heaven kind of words Jesus spoke of in the Beatitudes. Never do the guys that I mentor fail to say "I love you" when we part company.

Within the last year, Stan Stever was released after almost 33 years and has already become a staff member of Kindway. In his early prison days, he was a leader among the Arian Brotherhood. I can only imagine the vile, hate-filled speech that spewed from his mouth for the better part of his lifetime. But Jesus Christ has so transformed him that some of his dearest friends are now African American.

Sam Webb, who I continue to mentor after two years away from prison where he spent close to 40 years incarcerated, is one of the gentlest souls you want ever want to meet. Sam was a boxing champion in his early days in Ohio prisons. His words, like so many of the others, are like heavenly music to the ears, sweeter than honey, always a very taste of this kingdom of heaven.

James wrote for us today that a word out of your mouth can be like a spark which sets off a forest fire. I would say that the converse is also true. A kind word takes but a second to say but can last a lifetime.

My goodness, if speaking kindly to plants helps them grow, imagine what speaking kindly to one another would do...with Jesus as our model.

Amen.