

Sunday September 16th, 2018
Pentecost17

PRAYER: O Lord, we have not dealt as faithfully with you as you have with us. We promised to serve no god but you, but we have erected graven images in our hearts, if not on our altars. We vowed to honour your name, but we have taken it in vain. So now we pray that you will grant us the knowledge that there is a balm in Gilead, and also the grace to apply it to ourselves.

Teach us to live in faith, Lord. Make us sure of your love for us, make us unwavering in our love for you. Then, when we stumble upon the road, we will have the will to get up against and continue our journey toward the rising sun. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “Give us, Lord, the grace of giving
with a spirit wide and free
That ourselves and all our living,
We may offer unto thee.”

PASTORAL PRAYER: O dear God, you are the healing cream for our battered souls: be our prayers. The very soul of this world is weary, and in need of your healing mercy. Its past is a heavy burden on our shoulders; its present experience is a stumbling block for our feet; its tomorrow is lost in a vast maze of shifting values and priorities, for which we can find no map. Everything is shifting beneath us, changing so fast that the very earth trembles. We find ourselves losing our footing and falling, only to be dragged along by forces we cannot control nor understand nor will let us go. We are frightened, Lord. Frightened by what is happening, what it all means and what will become of us. Sometimes we feel so weak and helpless; sometimes we feel angry and powerless. So, we have returned to you, the Faithful One, the one in which there is no shadow of turning or change. We have returned to you who is our source of help and we ask for courage and we seek from you, wisdom.

O Lord, how we need your prophetic voice today. The very spirit of this world is torn, and in need of mending. Its lands are filled with war and injustice; its peoples are divided by colour, creed, class and culture. The world's unity has been ripped into a tattered shred, and we can find no pattern in which to mend it. Everything it seems is straining, pulling apart so hard that the very fabric of hope is in danger of tearing.

O God, how we yearn for a word from you; for sometimes we feel ignorant, foolish even. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed and defenseless. So, we have returned to you, the Faithful One, our Voice in time of trouble. We return to you and ask for judgment and we ask for clarity.

O God, you are the inner moving of the heart: hear our plea. The heart of the world is indifferent, needing your stimulation. Its eyes refuse to look upon the suffering; its ears refuse to listen to the abused; its lips speak out for the oppressed. Everything is numb, paralyzed so deeply that the very earth sleeps. Stir us awake, Lord. Sometimes we feel dead and listless; sometimes we feel cut off and hopeless. So, we have returned to you, the Faithful One, our Inspiration in time of trouble. We return to you and ask for revival and we ask for resurrection.

O God you are the thoughts of the mind: hear our thanksgiving! The mind of the world is confusing, needing your counsel, and we trust that you will grant understanding. If its intentions are not honourable; if its ambitions are not just; if its aspirations are not fair; if everything is muddled, so clouded that the very earth doubts it is turning on its axis, we believe that you will make things plain. If we feel bewildered and aimless; if we feel defeated and hapless, you will give direction. For this we have returned to you, the Faithful One, our Hope in time of trouble. We have returned to ask for your salvation; we have returned to ask for your presence; and we know we shall receive.

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James 3:1-12
“Setting Tongues, a Wagging.”

It is that time of year again. Summer vacations are over and the kids are back to school. For those of you with school age children I am sure you really resonate with the Staples commercial showing the Dad dragging a couch through a Staples store, singing, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year!”; all the while his very disgruntled children sit sulking on the couch. There most recent version has a mother draining the swimming pool and tossing the kids the store flyer.

For Laura and I it’s been a while we had to usher out the door a child to attend school but if you think getting your kid off to university is a lot easier, boy are you in for a rude awakening. It is also, of course, the time of year when church programs get under way again and first and foremost on our minds today is our Sunday school and midweek children and youth programs.

I am sure that our leadership in our youth programs is very dedicated and not at all like the ones in the following story. It seems that a certain pastor decided to visit one of the Sunday school classes and later gave a rather shocking report to his board. He told them that he had asked little Johnnie, “Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?” and Johnnie told him, “I didn’t do it.”

When the pastor told Johnnie’s Sunday School teacher what his answer was, the teacher said, “If Johnnie said he didn’t do it, Pastor, I’m sure he didn’t do it.” “What do you think of that?” the minister asked the board. After some silent thought, a deacon spoke up and said, “Pastor, don’t be so concerned. We have enough money in the bank to build a new one.”

Okay, one more story. Another little Johnnie came home from Sunday school bubbling with excitement. “And what did you learn today?” asked his father. “Wow! What a story!” said Johnnie. “The teacher told us about Moses leading all the Israelites out of Egypt, with Pharaoh’s Egyptians chasing them. At the Red Sea, Moses dropped an atomic bomb! Bang! Pow!

The waters of the Red Sea opened up, the Jews got across, the waters closed, and all the Egyptians were drowned.” “Tell me truthfully, Johnnie. Is that what your teacher told you?” gasped his father. “Naw,” said little Johnnie, “but, you’d never believe it if I told you the story the way he did.” Ah, the joys of teaching children. You just never know what they are going to say or what they are going to report back to their parents.

My sister Dawn taught kindergarten in Bancroft, and she tells us often that she told parents that she won’t believe everything their children say about home, as long as they don’t believe everything their child says about kindergarten. Teaching children or even adults, is often underrated. We say things like, “Those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach”. Instead of honouring teachers, as we should, we tend to blame teachers if our child is not progressing to the standards we demand and expect.

We conclude that it’s the teacher’s fault if our child doesn’t become a Rhodes Scholar or if the only meaningful employment our child will get has the words, “do you want fries with that?” attached. Not that such employment is without value, it’s just that we want so much more from

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our children; because in a twisted sort of way, we believe that our children's success reflects back on us.

I read about a little boy who handed his teacher a note from his mother. The teacher unsealed the note, read it, looked at the child with a frown and placed the note inside a desk drawer. "So, what did she write?" the boy asked. "It's a disclaimer." "A what?" "It says, 'The opinions expressed by Leo are not necessarily those of his mother and father.'" I am sure that on more than one occasion we wish we had sent a similar disclaimer note with our kids.

Now we must confess that in our more thoughtful moments, we might conclude that such high standards are a reflection more of our society than of our own attitudes, and really, we are making "much to do about nothing" in fretting about our children's success or lack of it. After all, for someone to be above average there has to be a great number of us who are average, or even below average.

Yet, our ambivalence about teachers and teaching remains and then we discover this morning that James, the brother of Jesus, seems to share this ambivalence about teachers but not because they are not important but because they are kept to a higher standard. We must recognize that James' words are really directed primarily at religious teachers but all of us involved in teaching need to pay heed to his words.

The first thing James writes is that true teachers are a rare commodity in the church; just ask any C.E. board trying to recruit teachers how true this is. Teachers must be appointed with great care because, as James points out, teachers will be held to a higher standard than others. That ought to make our recruitment efforts easier. The reason behind this high standard for teachers is the use and abuse of our tongues.

The Achilles heel, so to speak, for every teacher is our tongue. The tongue has caused more damage in the classroom, in the church and in the home than anything else. Remember the old rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Whoever first uttered that chestnut, created a monumental lie. Words do hurt and hurt very deeply. Things said to us, or about us, can take years to overcome; if we ever do.

I bet everyone in this room has reminisced at some point about their childhood, only to come head long into a painful moment from years ago when we were cut not by stones or sticks but by words. What is worse is when someone you know, often a family member, drags up a time when you said something you shouldn't have. Something you had hoped would remain buried forever.

No wonder James says that our tongues are full of deadly poison. Our tongues are inconsistent; one minute it is praising God and the next cursing others. The tongue, James says, "is full of a wickedness that can ruin your whole life". One word can set a forest fire. I've seen areas devastated by forest fires and I can tell you that it is an eerie sight. It can take a hundred years or more for that forest to recover.

James says that our tongue is like a rudder on a ship or the bit in a horse's mouth turning us in a direction we should or would rather not go. We all understand this problem with our tongues. We have all experienced the destructive force of a tongue and we have been the dispenser of

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destruction by our own tongues. But why, do you think James links all this with teachers. Why, this special emphasis on teaching?

Perhaps it is because teachers use their tongues more than others. A teacher's vocation requires them to speak often. Teachers also bear the burden of having their students hang on their every word. Teachers influence their students by their words and as a result God will hold them accountable for what they taught. For ministers and lay people who teach in the church, this can be a discouraging thought.

The nature of the tongue is such that you cannot let your guard down for even a moment. All of us, I am sure, have said things we wish we could take back, but we cannot. Once it's out there, it's out there.

We also all know in our hearts that when someone says something that hurts us and then tries to lessen the blow by saying "I didn't mean it or I was only kidding," that they were probably being truthful in their feelings towards us. A teacher therefore has a tremendous responsibility to influence the life course of someone or a group of students'. For example, just imagine the impact a teacher can have by saying a certain child is slow, stupid, or on the other hand brilliant or talented.

And it doesn't have to be just words that influence. In every classroom I have ever been in as a student, even through seminary, it was very clear from the teacher's actions that certain students were more liked than others and thereby more valued by the teacher. The real key to being a blessing to our students, rather than hindrance is, of course, our hearts. Students are very adept at sensing the sincerity of our words.

A teacher, who talks about our need to love one another and then after class says disparaging things about his or her students to others, is not very sincere. Nor are students going to have much confidence in their teacher if they get their basic facts wrong. For example; to this day, it still frustrates me that my geography teacher (you will like this Jim Carroll, as you taught geography) in grade seven gave me 99 out of 100 on a test, when I failed to name the eighth continent.

Like you I always believed there were only seven continents, but my teacher insisted, for some strange reason, that New Zealand was a continent. Needless to say, my confidence in her teaching of geography was severely undermined. Like all of you, I have had teachers who have inspired me, and some who discouraged me. I have had teachers who turned me on to the subject matter at hand, and others who have turned me right off.

I have been praised by teachers, embarrassed by teachers, and mislabeled by teachers. And all of it has had a tremendous impact on the kind of person I am today, as your teachers have had a tremendous impact on you.

The key, of course, to being the kind of teacher that inspires students, and guides them in positive directions, is controlling our tongues. Obviously, it means thinking before we speak.

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I will be honest with you, that this is a life long struggle. We have a little joke in my family about how short and stubby my tongue is. I cannot stick it out of my mouth very far while others can actually touch the end of their noses with their tongues. In response to the teasing, I just report that my tongue is so short from all the times I have had to bite it rather than say what was immediately on my mind.

Does your tongue have lots of bite marks on it? Can you actually grin and bear it, or do you just have to get it out? If you find yourself in need of being honest about your every opinion and feelings regardless of who you are talking to, then you are probably not teacher material. If you cannot see the higher standard you have been called to regarding controlling your tongue then please don't get into the classroom. It's not your place.

But should you find yourself in the classroom, or the pulpit, or leading a youth program: and you speak before you think, don't panic. We all misspeak, or misjudge, in our teaching roles. Also, it is important to remember that no student-teacher relationship is irredeemable. A poor relationship can always be changed to one of life enhancement for both student and teacher.

And now to one of my favourite stories, which some of you may have heard before, but it is still worth hearing again. Miss Thompson was a schoolteacher who every year would say to her students, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same. I have no favourites." Of course, she wasn't being completely truthful. Teachers do have favourites and, what's worse, most teachers have students that they simply don't like.

Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson simply didn't like, and for good reason. He didn't seem interested in school. He wore a deadpan, blank expression on his face, and his eyes were glassy and unfocused. When she spoke to Teddy, he merely shrugged his shoulders. His clothes were mussed and his hair unkempt. He wasn't an attractive boy, and he certainly wasn't likable.

Whenever she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting X's next to wrong answers. When she put the F's at the top of papers, she did it with flair. She should have known better; she had Teddy's records, and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but home situation.

2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas time, the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her presents, piled them on her desk, and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had bought her a gift. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and held together with scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson. From Teddy."

When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately

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putting on the bracelet and dotting some perfume on her wrist. Holding up her wrist for the other children to smell, she said, “Doesn’t it smell lovely?”

The other children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with “oohs” and “ahs.” When school was over, and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, “Miss Thompson? Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother...and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I’m glad you like my presents.

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her. The next day when children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher, she had become an agent of God, committed to loving her children and doing things that would live on after her.

She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of the school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He caught up with most of the students and was ahead of some of them. Once the school year ended, Miss Thompson didn’t hear from Teddy Stallard for a long time. Then she received a note that read.

Dear Miss Thompson, I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard. Four years later, another note came. “Dear Miss Thompson, they just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I have had a good four years. Love, Teddy Stallard.

And four years later: Dear Miss Thompson, as of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the twenty-seventh to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year. Love Teddy Stallard. Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy’s mother would have sat. She deserved to be there; for she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

And can you be the teacher, the neighbour, the aunt, or uncle, or the friend in a young person’s life that profoundly changes everything? Because that’s what truly qualified teachers do; they teach from the heart.

BENEDICTION: “May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ all that is pleasing to him. Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep by the sheep by an everlasting covenant, signed with his blood. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.