

“Where Have You Been?”

James 3:1-12

September 13, 2009

Homecoming Sunday

Mark Twain once said that “it is better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.” He probably shouldn’t have said that since it very likely offended someone. It is so easy to say the wrong thing or to have someone take what you say the wrong way—the way you didn’t intend it to be taken. A friend said the other day that someone might as well not even work where she worked since they rarely came to work anyway. I looked at her like I couldn’t believe what she had just said. She looked back at me and said without pausing, “I didn’t mean that to sound ugly; I was just stating the truth.”

The great American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright said, “The truth is more important than the facts.” Many Westerners have a difficult time with his claim because we associate the truth with facts. But we should know better. American politicians especially, but also newscasters have been infamous for twisting the facts into their version of the truth. Evidently this spinning of the facts into a distortion of the truth that is sometimes maddeningly difficult to argue with was prevalent when our 16th president was in office. Abraham Lincoln rightly said, “How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Four; calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.” The premise we begin with affects the outcome. We may say, “Well, the facts are ma’am, that this here appendage is not a tail; it’s a leg.” But everyone knows it’s a tail.

Pontius Pilate asked what he thought was a rhetorical question when he asked, “What is truth?” when Truth stood right in front of him. Col. Jessup said, “You can’t handle the truth” when the facts were used against him in the court room. The truth is sometimes hard to come by and oftener difficult to explain. Perhaps that is why the great mathematician and theologian

Blaise Pascal explained, “We know the truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart.”

Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” I think he was talking about something other than facts—something that could not be spun by politicians and news folks and attorneys. I think Jesus was speaking of himself when he said we could know the truth. Certainly he wasn’t speaking of being able to cut through the television chatter and determine if the Democrats or the Republicans were the ones telling the truth this year. When he said we could know the truth, he meant that we could know *him*. Only in knowing Jesus Christ is truth experienced in such a profound manner that it produces liberty—freedom from the tyranny of fact spinning. This is in part because he is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. There is constancy in God that one will never find in man.

But how do you come upon this great truth called Jesus? Is it by walking to an altar and having a preacher pray over you? Sometimes. But as Joel said (Joel 2:17) and the band Casting Crowns sings, there is a lot that can be undone between the altar and the door...especially if we take our eyes off of the truth and let them linger too long upon those facts called the people around us.

Last week I wore old shorts, a ratty shirt, and running shoes to preach in so that I could provide a visual of what James said in chapter two, that the man who comes into the assembly in shabby clothing ought to be afforded the same, if not better, treatment as the rich man. Someone said after the service, “Preacher, you hit the nail on the head. My grand kids came to church in jeans once and some folks in church spoke poorly of them for it, and they have never come back to this church or any other church again.” You run a great risk when you take your eyes off the truth and let them focus on the facts. It is always detrimental to stop looking at Jesus so that you can keep boring holes into the ones who offended you.

Last Sunday, of course, by dressing the way I did, I ran the risk of offending someone before I even opened my mouth. And of course once I opened this big trap, all bets were off. It

seems like every time I have opened my mouth over the 25 years I have been preaching, someone has misunderstood me. Especially in my first church. Margie always took me wrong and went running to the Senior Pastor to tattle for something I did not say. Well, I mean, I did say those things; that is a fact. But the way she took them was not the way I intended their meaning to be perceived. Usually. The truth of the matter was that I loved Margie and would not want to hurt her. Maybe that is why I love being the Chaplain and friend of so many Police officers. It is not that they always understand my meaning; they mostly just don't care. I guess they have gotten thick skins from dealing with a certain side of the public.

But is James really concerned here with folks misunderstanding the preacher's intentions or even someone occasionally saying a colorful word when a hammer hits their thumb? I don't think so—not in the context of the chapter and the previous chapter for that matter. Those are matters, due to time constraints, better left to commentaries. Let me just cut to the chase and offer you what I think is really being said by James, along with what amounts to a side of embellishment and apology by your preacher.

First of all, I want to say that I am so sorry for anything I or anyone else has said to you over the years that may have offended you and chased you away. Certainly there are those kinds of stories in this church's history. Maybe no one is present today who has been offended here in the past. But if you are or you hear this over the internet, I am sorry. Sometimes, as I said, we open our mouths and all bets are off. I want to encourage you however, to please not dwell upon me any other Friend. We aren't the point; neither is what we said the point. Jesus is the point and what he said is what we need to turn our attentions to. We have to get over our feelings, factual as they may be, and get to the crux. Otherwise, we stay mired in our own distorted realities when Jesus said he wanted to liberate us from those facts.

People have said and are going to say boneheaded things—present company included. We are, after all, just people. No one is master over the tongue. We may have mastered car repair

or cooking or building cabinets or taking photographs. But no one is master of their tongue. James said that the tongue sets the world on fire and is the rudder that can cause great ships to wreck. “It is a restless evil,” anxious to cause more trouble. He is a willful person who is able to control that fountain; out of it comes fresh and salt, good and evil, blessing and curse.

If we curse another human being, who is made in God’s own image, are we so much maligning that person or God himself? We need to be very careful with these tongues. All of us. But none so much as the teacher. But even Rabbi Jesus could rankle folks. He said things that really stirred the pot. I guess he was speaking the truth in love. Sometimes I suspect he may have been having some fun at the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ expense. Gloria Steinem said, “The truth will set you free. But first, it will piss you off.” The truth does have a way of getting under your skin. It is supposed to. It’s in the job description. So James cannot mean that we should simply be careful not to offend folks. What was he talking about when he said that not many should become teachers?

Teachers were held in the highest regard in that ancient Church. There was no greater honor bestowed upon a family than that they take in their rabbi, taking care of his every need. Therefore people were eager to be teachers. And some of them should never have been teachers. I have had some of those folks as teachers. They couldn’t teach their way out of a wet paper pulpit. I have also been blessed by exceptional teachers and professors. It doesn’t seem to make much difference whether they are young or old but what does make a difference is maturity and experience. Some of the things I said from the pulpit as a young preacher, make me shudder when I think of them. Young preachers and preachers in general should be very careful about what they teach for they will be held more accountable for their words than others. This is because of ripple effect. Some preacher says something to a church and suddenly 100 people take it as gospel and start preaching it. So you better be careful what you say, teachers. That’s what James is saying.

Heresy or false teaching is all-too-easy to get caught up in. It gives you a corner on the

truth. In other words, you have a few facts picked up from a verse or maybe a cross reference, if we are really fortunate, and a dogma spewed forth upon all who are unfortunate enough to be nearby. There is none so annoying or dangerous as the one who thinks he knows the truth because he has a single fact in hand. Read whole paragraphs, whole letters, complete books and testaments, indeed, the entire Bible—and that, many times—before pronouncing your doctrines as law upon the Church.

There are people who will not worship with other Believers because they do not use the right English translation. There is no dogma more bland and pathetic. There is no doctrine that sounds any more like that famous doctrine, *We've never done it that way before and we ain't changing now*, than that one. I defy most Christians to read the original King's English of 1611 and understand a word of it. And it is not so much because they cannot understand archaic English; it is because they cannot read. Oh, they can read words; they know the facts that G-O-D spells god and that D-O-G spells dog. But do they perceive the truth of what connected words and sentences mean? Most Christians I have known wouldn't know a metaphor if it clobbered them over the head or the meaning of a parable unless the Rabbi explained it to them. And before you get offended, please understand that is precisely what Jesus had to do for both his disciples and us (in scripture). We are just as numbskulled as Peter ever was. Let us confess it; it may be good for the soul and will certainly be good for the Church and our families.

It is easy to say the wrong thing and just about as easy to teach a heresy, unless we do as James said earlier in his letter. I paraphrase 1:19: Slow down, shut up, and simmer down. But that probably offends someone. And if that didn't, let's try this on for size: Television has proved that most of us aren't even as smart as a fifth grader. So why don't we just admit it and get over ourselves? No one has a corner on truth—not even teachers and preachers. But we can know the Truth...and he will set us free...if we will keep our eyes on him and off the words of others. Jesus said it well to Peter in today's gospel lesson, "You're setting your mind on the things of man, not

on the things of God.”

One of my favorite Zen stories has two monks, Tanzan and Ekido, traveling down a muddy road after a heavy rain. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk komono and sash, unable to cross the intersection. “Come on girl,” said Tanzan. At once he lifted her in his arms and he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself. “We monks don’t go near females,” he told Tanzan, especially young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?

“I left the girl there,” said Tanzan. “Are you still carrying her?”

What load of “facts” are you carrying? Where have the facts left you? Where has your heart been focused over the years and where has that left you? Where have you been all these years? Some of us are still riled over something someone said or did years ago? You probably misunderstood those facts for truth anyway. And even if you didn’t, there is a greater truth to be learned: Jesus. Some of us have yet to learn the truth. That’s why we are in bondage to someone else’s words. And they probably didn’t mean them anyway.

Where have you been? It’s time to come home. To Jesus.