

“Listening for the Spirit of Wisdom”

James 3:1-12; Proverbs 1:20-33 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 15, 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be stretched wide by the compassionate pull of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

There are those who would prefer that politics never come up in church. That is impossible, of course, but different preachers find various ways of obscuring the political implications of the gospel to varying degrees. What’s funny is when the lectionary – a pre-planned schedule of scripture readings, mind you, put in place years prior to any particular event – makes avoiding politics practically unavoidable, because the connections are simply too obvious. Coincidence or Holy Spirit, who can say?

I am, of course, referring to the fall of 2003, when the passage we just heard from Proverbs came up in the lectionary, right after the resounding defeat of Amendment One in Alabama. It was the first year of Governor Bob Riley’s tenure as Governor, and he had proposed a broad and bold reform package that would have re-structured Alabama’s tax policies in ways that would have provided much better and more secure funding for education across the state.

Now in order to fully understand this story, you need to know that Alabama has the most regressive tax structure in the country, demanding income tax on people living well below the poverty line, combined with some of the lowest property tax rates in the nation, much to the delight of Big Timber and Big Ag. Education was almost entirely

dependent on sales tax, which varied widely from year to year, such that toilet paper was on the school supply list for grade school kids each fall. Despite the druthers of many of the constituencies who had elected him, Bob Riley could see that this structure was not in the overall best interests of the people of Alabama, so he tried to change things. I hadn't voted for him, but I was proud of him. And when Amendment One failed by a more than 2-to-1 margin on September 9, I felt bad for him.

I was a relatively new pastor, so this was my first turn through the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. So when I read these words a day or so later about scoffers hating knowledge and eventually reaping the consequences of their foolishness, I couldn't help but think about Bob Riley and how this passage must reflect a little bit of what he might be feeling that week. I sent him an email, what I think you would call a pastoral email, sharing the passage and assuring him, that despite failure, he had done the right thing. I never heard back, of course, but this passage will always be connected to him for me because of how directly the lectionary's suggested scripture spoke to current events that week.

Now, if you were paying attention to the news this week, you may have assumed I was going in a different direction, connecting our other reading with this week's events. Indeed, there is at least one person who has painfully learned this week that the untamed tongue is a fire set by hell. Erika Lee is a resident of Springfield, Ohio, who was chatting with a neighbor recently about a missing cat. Did the cat belong to the neighbor's daughter's friend? An acquaintance of a friend? It wasn't clear. What happened to the

cat? Nobody knows. But somehow in there, a rumor got started that the cat was attacked by another unspecified neighbor who was part of the Haitian immigrant community that has recently grown in Springfield. Local authorities had clarified, as has Erika Lee herself, that there is no evidence that any Haitian community member has done anything to anyone's pet or any other local animal.

Nonetheless, the rumor caught, indeed like a forest fire as James imagines, and took off, amplified in a national debate Tuesday night. And before the week was out, schools and municipal buildings in Springfield had to be closed because of bomb threats. "It just exploded into something I didn't mean to happen," Erika Lee said.¹ One news story continues, "Lee said she had no idea the post would become part of a rumor mill that would spiral into the national consciousness. She has since deleted the Facebook post."

In "normal" times, we might read this passage from James 3 and wonder what sort of drama is going on in the writer's community that has him so riled up about the destructive power of idle chatter. But we are not living in normal times. Misinformation is flying around at the speed of the internet, being repeated and magnified and adorned with more graphic detail each time it's shared. And the consequences of this "idle chatter" are dangerous. There are many true aspects to our reading from Proverbs today, but the assertion that it is the scoffers and fools who will bear the consequences

¹ https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/-just-exploded-springfield-woman-says-never-meant-spark-rumors-haitian-rcna171099?fbclid=IwY2xjawFT02R1eHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHY81j1vAuKcoEqfrAw_PfO5sDKEE9IhO9J0knebTlynvOywKcJ45bDA2gA_aem_HcD8gtB9uyoITAEg_7KBrg

for their bad behavior is a bit off. Far too often, these days, it is the people in power who spread dangerous lies and the people who are most vulnerable who are victimized and attacked as a result of those lies.

So what do we, as followers of Jesus, do in such extraordinary times? How are we called to respond? What sorts of self-control do we need to seek for our own tongues, so we can avoid feeding fires of hatred and violence? The writer of James certainly indulges in quite a lot of dramatic flair, but the main point is there in verse 9: with the same tongue, “we bless the Lord and Father, and . . . curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” “This ought not to be so,” James insists, and I agree. This is the crux of it: If we claim to love God, we are called to love God’s creation, including our fellow humans made in the image of God. If we claim to follow Jesus, the Word made flesh, we are called to live and speak truth, rather than scoffing at the wisdom the Holy Spirit is offering us. James points to examples of natural law – a grapevine that doesn’t bear figs or a saltwater sea that doesn’t offer fresh water – to explain why it doesn’t make sense that compassion and denigration could both come out of the same mouth. He leaves it to us to conclude that if the denigration persists, the compassion eventually becomes false. More contemporary “natural law” reminds us that we have two ears and one mouth, so we ought to listen twice as much as we talk. Wisdom agrees, with the added note to be careful who and what we listen to.

More than anything, in times of heightened tension like we’re living in today, we need to stay grounded in our faith, in our proclamation that God is love, that Jesus

welcomes all, that the Holy Spirit is here, there and everywhere, guiding us into deeper faithfulness in new and surprising ways. Those who seek power by manipulating with lies and hatred prey on people who are fearful. The angels all throughout the biblical witness call upon us to “Fear not!” Those who want to use us to spread ugly rumors about neighbors we haven’t gotten to know well enough yet can only do so if we’ve forgotten what Jesus teaches us about who our neighbors are and how we are to treat them. Those who encouraged us to scoff at knowledge do so because we’re easier to lead astray when we’ve forgotten to cross-check our sources and carefully discern where to find reliable information.

In the midst of an ugly election season, Christians need to stand up for compassion and truth. We need to model wise listening and careful, responsible speech. We need to protect the vulnerable and reject any attempts to use them as political pawns. We need to keep following Jesus as a higher priority than our loyalty to any candidate or platform. May we be wise; may we be courageous; may we be compassionate. Hallelujah and Amen.