

WGUMC September 16, 2018
James 3:1-18

"Fire Season"

At 459,000 acres, this summer's Ranch Fire in Mendocino County is now the largest wildfire in California history. But it's a long way from being the largest fire in U. S. history, which I've been reading about in Timothy Egan's book, *The Big Burn*. That fire burned 3 million acres across Montana, Idaho and Washington in 1910, killing 87 people, mostly firefighters.

I wish we could say that fire season was over, but even if it were, we are still heading into campaign season, and this upcoming election is promising to be a scorcher.

Every two years, I give thanks to God that I don't have TV. I don't have to suffer through a long, hot season of campaign ads. I don't have to listen to the exaggerations and distortions, the accusations and character assassinations. I remember the last time I preached on this text. It was September 2012, and the presidential campaign was in full swing, and I was convinced that our civic discourse could get

any worse. But what Robin Williams once said about alcoholics is also true of our politics: we violate our standards faster than we can lower them.

I think we should require everyone who wants to hold public office to read the Letter of James, especially the third chapter: "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire...a world of iniquity...a restless evil, full of deadly poison." And then we should issue every voter a fire extinguisher.

But, let's be honest, the Letter of James wasn't written for politicians in high office. The letter was written for the likes of you and me. The fact is that the whole world, and not just Washington, is on fire. Political speech may be highly flammable but the politicians are only saying what a lot of other people are tweeting. Even if we turn off the TV and unplug the internet, we can't escape the fire because it burns inside of us.

At some point, we have to stop blaming the politicians and take a look at the people who elect them.

We know that James is right. It's easier to tame a wild beast than it is to tame the tongue. It's apparent that our mouths have minds of their own. Just listen to our children. We no longer think that children should be seen and not heard. We encourage them to express themselves. "Use your words," we say. Then we wonder why we can't seem to teach them when not to use their words. How long does it take for a child to learn that not every word that pops into her head needs to be said?

Yet you can't blame the kids, because I know of a lot of adults who haven't learned that lesson. Some of us long ago learned it, but as we become more advanced in years, we forget it or we figure that we no longer need to abide by it. Whatever our age, most of us are still working on it.

So to those of us who are stuck in this incendiary age, what would Jesus say? Perhaps you remember what Jesus said about what is clean and unclean. He said, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." [Matthew 15:11, 18]

Yes, we have to be careful what we say and how we say it, because according to Jesus, our words reveal our inner world. They are a sign of God's indwelling grace or they are a symptom of some soul dysfunction. Either way, they will have an impact on someone else. Like a salve, our words can heal. Or like shrapnel, they can tear and wound. Whatever words we choose to say to a spouse, to a child, to a stranger, to a neighbor, to our TV set or computer screen, those words expose some inner truth. They open a window so that others can peer into our hearts and see what is stirring in our souls.

As we know too well, Twitter is an unforgiving mirror. It captures in 280 characters an image of the “restless evil,” the “bitter envy,” and the “selfish ambition,” that lurks in a great many of us to some degree and in some of us to a great degree. Twitter acts as an accelerant in our media wildfire. And in James’ words, it encourages us to be “boastful and false to the truth.” Pardon me if I sound a little bitter about Twitter.

As concerned as we are that there is some Big Brother watching us, I have to tell you that there are no privacy controls, no security software that can keep God from watching us.

Psalm 139 says that God is the one who knows our every word, discerns our every thought, and follows our every move. If you've ever tried to keep a log of everything that you put into your mouth when you're dieting, think of God keeping a log of everything that comes out of our mouth when we're talking, from the time we get out of bed in the morning until

we collapse into bed at night. Imagine having to read that back to yourself at the end of the day. Would we be embarrassed by the things we say? By the amount of time we actually spend griping and gossiping, criticizing and cursing, arguing and boasting, accusing and denying? And if only some of what comes out of our mouths is "restless evil, full of deadly poison," what does that say about what is in our hearts?

Most of us, after hearing all the words we say during the course of an average day, are going to get right down on our knees and pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." [Psalm 51:10]

And then the next day, we're going to get up and wonder what can we do to keep our tongues from getting us into trouble today? My kindergarten teacher kept a bar of soap on the sink in the back of the classroom. I remember it was yellow and had blood-red streaks on it. She told us that that was the soap she used for washing out the mouth of anyone who dared

utter a bad word. We all believed her, and she never had to use it.

The author of James says that not many of us are called to be teachers, and Miss Dwyer should never have picked up a piece of chalk. Clearly, not everyone can be like Steve Quigley who had a true calling to teach. Nevertheless, every one of us is teaching all the time, which is why we have to watch our tongues. For out of the same mouth come blessings and curses. But cursing can't teach anyone how to be a blessing.

So, let's not call our opponents a "basket of deplorables" or give them derogatory names or make fun of their appearance or their intelligence or their accent. That's deadly poison. Are there's so much of it these days. This is the zeitgeist, the spirit of our times, and make no mistake, this is an evil spirit. We have to resist it with all our strength.

So what would Jesus do? I don't think Jesus would have a bar of soap sitting on the sink for us. There are better methods

for teaching us the wisdom from above. Instead, Jesus would have us follow James when he says, we must "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." [2:19] We get into too much trouble simply because we can't get ourselves to slow down, shut up, and cool off. Where there's less wind and less heat, there's less fire.

And when you think about it, the fewer the words, the more impact each one has. In that case, we ask, what would Jesus say? While Jesus had a few choice things to say about the Pharisees, Sadducees and all the powers that be, the fact is that forgiveness won out over fire in the end. Remember, Jesus didn't say much when Pilate questioned him or when the soldiers spat on him or when the mob scoffed at him. Only, "Father, forgive them." [Luke 23:34]

We remember how Jesus came to the end, and we are amazed that he didn't fight their fire with fire. He didn't use his words as weapons of war. He didn't use the same mouth to

bless God and then curse those who were made in the image of God. There was no bitter envy or selfish ambition in his heart, so there was no temptation to boast or be false to the truth.

To have the wisdom from above, like Jesus, we don't need very many words. We could get by with just seven. The first two are: "Thank you." For we didn't earn or deserve a single second of this life and so our attitude always has to be gratitude. Then there's "I'm sorry." Not the non-apology of the politicians. Not "I'm sorry that you misunderstood me when I compared you to a monkey." But, "I'm sorry that I hurt you. It was cruel of me." Real apologies build up our humanity. And then finally, "I love you." In spite of everything. Because of everything. I love you.

That about covers it, doesn't it? "Thank you"; "I'm sorry"; "I love you." With these seven words, it's impossible to start fires we can't put out, or build walls we can't tear down, or cause wounds we can't bind up. Use these words, and you will

gain the wisdom from above that is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

When I first made that suggestion six years ago, Al and Dorothy Mauseth took my advice. And every time I saw Dorothy up until just this last year, she would always say to me, "At night before Al and I went to bed, we would say to each other, 'Thank you,' 'I'm sorry,' and 'I love you.'"

We forget to say these words out loud, but we need to. There's a reason God gave humans the gift of language and why Jesus is called the Word of God and not the Good Intention of God. So to keep you cool in this fire season, I commend to you the seven last words of Al and Dorothy. Use them often in all your relationships and I promise you, a harvest of righteousness will be sown in peace for those who make peace. Thank you (for listening). I'm sorry (for sounding so preachy). I love you (and God bless you).