
Worthless Religion

James 1:17-27

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 2, 2012 by the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor

While it is always exciting to be back at Duke Chapel, it is especially exciting to be here today, on Dean Powery's first Sunday as Chaplain to Duke University. If there's anything better than preaching on your first Sunday, it's having a guest preacher who was already on the schedule so you can catch your breath. As for those of you who had hoped you would be hearing him today, take heart—for lo, I am with you but this little while and he shall be with you always.

Plus, James is the real preacher today—a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. All I really have to do is stay out of his way. I wonder all the time about how Christianity would have shaped up if James had written *half* as many letters as Paul did. If you put all the letters of James, Peter and John together—those who knew Jesus in the flesh—their combined witness is shorter than Paul's two letters to the Corinthians. Paul—who *never* knew Jesus in the flesh—wrote a good hundred pages more than all the other letter writers put together, so that *he* was the one whose views of Jesus, God, Torah, church, ministry, women, sex, time, salvation, afterlife, and faith took root in the early church.

Let that be a lesson to all of you who have stopped writing letters in favor of Facebook postings. You will never shape a major world religion. But then, neither did James. While his lone letter had what it took to be included in the New Testament, he got tucked in near the end with his brothers Peter and John. Like most last pick players, they don't get into the game very often. They just sit and watch Paul hit home runs.

But today it's James's turn, and he's hot. He has come to the plate swinging and he's not going to stop until he convinces us that of all the body parts we thought might cause us problems in the practice of our faith in this world, it's our tongues we had better watch. If we cannot figure out how to bridle them, he says, then our religion is worthless. Far better that we should take warm supper in a basket to a single mom and her kids than go around talk, talk, talking about what an important thing that is to do.

That this admonition should come to us during election season is either ironic or providential, since it means that none of us has to look very far for examples of unbridled tongues: "legitimate rape," they're going to put ya'll back in chains," "not concerned about the very poor," "the private sector is doing fine." Thank goodness for politicians. As long as they keep talking, the rest of us can focus on their runaway tongues instead of our own. I don't know about you, but I have always found that the best strategy for avoiding change is to find someone whose sins are worse (or at least more public) than my own.

As a preacher, James is something of a scold. He peppers his letter with more than a hundred imperatives: do this, don't do that, or else. It's one of the reasons Martin Luther had no use for him; but if you figure that James, poor letter writer that he was, had something to say about what it means to be Christian that was at least as important as what Paul had to say, then it's worth enduring his berating long enough to hear what's at the heart of it. Most scolds have something they're passionate about, after all.

James buries the clue to his passion in the part of his letter we heard a moment ago. God gave us birth by the word of truth, he says. God brought us to being through the act of divine speech. After God had said, "Let there be light...Earth...Seas...plants...birds...cattle and creeping things and wild animals of every kind," God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our own likeness"—and it was so.

God gave us *birth by the word of truth* in fulfillment of God's own *purpose*, James says, which was to make us chips off the old block, "a kind of first fruits of his creatures." God could have made us stone creatures, tree creatures, sea creatures, or winged creatures, but God made us speech creatures instead—

human beings made in God's own likeness, which is to say, capable of joining God in the work of creation by speaking things into being ourselves.

The problem with this plan is that we turned out to be really, really good at it. In short order, God's precious word babies were all grown up, using language to blame each other, curse each other, mislead and lie to each other. Of course they also used language to praise, bless, and woo each other, but the words rolled off their tongues so easily that sometimes people did not even know what they were going to say until they heard themselves saying it. The words just flew out of their mouths, floating in front of their eyes in shimmering globes that looked like soap bubbles at first, then hardened into small worlds of their own creating that spun away from them to go do whatever they were created to do.

The people who had made those worlds could say, "Wait! I didn't mean it!" all they liked, but once the words were out of their mouths it was too late—because God had made them capable of speaking things into being the same way God had, even when they had second thoughts. That was how much power those speech creatures had. The only power they did not have was to uncreate what they had created. Once the worlds of their words were made, they were made—some of them spinning away to do great harm while others spun away to do real good—with the breath of their human creators still warm inside of them.

In the biblical imagination, breath is what all words are made of at first—the the warm, moist living spirit of those who speak them. Written words come later in human history, when people figure out how to substitute dark marks on a page for the living realities of things, but in the beginning God did not *write* the cosmos—God *spoke* it, one shimmering world at a time—filling each divine word with enough breath to give it life and then watching it spin away to make more life on its own.

When we speak, our words are full of our own breath too, though you can't judge the power of a word by how much breath it takes. A word like "eschatological" takes a lot of breath, but it's not nearly as powerful as the word "hope." Since I am teaching intro to theology this semester, I have to keep trying to remember why it is important to teach students to say "Christology" and "soteriology" when all they want to know is who Jesus is and what it means to be saved—but I do, I do—if only so they will be able to survive in settings where big, airy words are valued more highly than the small, solid words that sustain a human life.

Another thing to notice about the words we speak is how the breath that goes into them comes out in different ways. If you try to say "love" with the same velocity and air pressure required for a word like "hate," then it's not going to come out sounding like love at all. Every word breathes in a different way. If you're a Southerner, then you know that the first pew in a fire-and-brimstone Baptist church is called the spit pew for a reason. But when that same preacher comes to see you in the hospital, it turns out he also knows words that revive you like puffs of fresh air on a stifling day.

We have so many kinds of words in us, and so many ways to say them. These days we also have so many media to say and hear them in that they can multiply in a flash, like the cascading images in a fun house mirror. What starts out as a single tweet trends and in minutes 140 characters have become millions. Clint Eastwood talks to an empty chair in front of 50,000 people while 33 million more watch on television. Those who of you who missed it can still add to those numbers by checking out any one of a dozen postings on You Tube, where Clint and Britney Spears (in her X Factor debut) were vying for most viewers last time I checked.

It's a different kind of spit pew, but the words really are flying—so many of them all the time that it's no wonder some of us don't think they're worth much anymore. When you hear thousands and thousands of words every day, it's easy to forget how powerful some of them still are. When oil is plentiful, gas is cheap. But even when gas is cheap, it can still set things on fire.

Like many of you, I grew up with a saying that came in handy on the playground. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.* I am pretty sure my mother taught me that the first time I came home with a rip in my dress and dirt in my hair. I used it too, even though I knew it wasn't true. Sticks and stones were nothing compared to some of the mean things that other kids could think up to say.

You could practically watch that act of creation in process—how they sucked up a big bellyful of air and held it inside them while they picked out the perfect toxins to go with it, then breathed that awful mess out on whoever’s bones they wanted to break without leaving a bruise. Now I know that some of them learned how to do that by having it done to them at home, while others were just trying to figure out what they could get away with. Either way, the power of their words was never in question—just what kinds of worlds they would create with them and why.

Later in life, I have learned that plain carelessness can often do as much harm as premeditated meanness. My tongue starts moving before my mind has engaged. I respond too quickly, without listening carefully enough. “This too will pass,” I say to someone whose heart has just been run over, while she looks at me like I have just backed over it again, or “I’m sure you’ll do just fine” to someone in deep need of encouragement, who hears those words as the curt dismissal they are. Sometimes you have a second or two after you let something like that out of your mouth to make another, finer world to eclipse the first, careless one, but if you don’t then that small, cold world you created without thinking is going to orbit between the two of you for longer than you would like.

Gossip’s the hardest, though. I can come up with a dozen excuses for doing it: there’s no faster way to bond with a new friend, or catch up with an old one; it’s how I learn more about what’s happening in my community than I’m ever going to learn by reading the newspaper. Sometimes I tell myself I’m doing it because I need to check out an impression I have with someone else. *She strikes me as a little bit of an imposter; have you seen any evidence of that?* Other times I try to justify it on ethical grounds. Even if I’m not positive that what I’m saying is true, isn’t it better to give someone a heads up about a possible situation than to keep what I *think* I know to myself?

Unfortunately, none of these holds up under scrutiny. They’re just incontrovertible evidence of a runaway tongue, because what they all boil down to is this: they serve me and no one else. No one eats any better, sleeps any better, or gets any more justice in this world thanks to the gaudy little planets my gossip makes. They don’t even catch the light. In the cosmos of words, they are the black holes, pulling in otherwise useful energy and swallowing it right up.

On my way to school every day I pass a church sign that says, “Well Done is Better than Well Said.” That would make a great subtitle for the letter of James, but it’s not quite all I’m saying here—nor all he’s saying there either, because if our capacity for language really is given to us by God to fulfill God’s own purpose, then *saying* is its own kind of *doing*. The right word at the right time can save a person’s life, the same way a cruel or careless word can open the trap door that sends a person spinning down.

For all his scolding, James never says, “Will you please just shut up!” because that would amount to returning God’s gift. What he says instead is “be slow to speak.” Take your time. Think twice. Choose your words with care because once you have given them life with your breath, they will spin away from you, taking on lives of their own out there where you cannot control them anymore. The only place you can control them is here, where they come out, which is the same place the bit of a bridle goes.

The main difference between your tongue and a wild horse is that only you can tame your tongue. No one else can do it for you, and the choice is yours. Still, James says, God has given us a leg up if we want it. When God was speaking us into existence, creating us in God’s own image, God planted the word inside us, James says. The whole universe of God’s life-giving speech is embedded in us as surely as our bones and breath, with power even now to save our souls—not by our faith in it alone (remember, Paul is away today) but by our God-given ability to do what it says, starting with our care for our most defenseless neighbors in their distress.

If we want religion that is worth something, James says, that’s what we’ll do—yield the bit to the implanted word inside of us, letting it slow us down enough to choose our words with care and even then to know when it is time to stop speaking them and start acting them out instead, like players in God’s own game of charades. In a world where too many words have hardened too many hearts, the incarnate word goes on speaking without words—God’s word made flesh—not just once upon a time in one person far away from here, but right here, right now, through the eloquent flesh of speech creatures like you and me.

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