

James 3: 1-12
Mark 7: 24-30
September 6, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The most eye-opening and challenging book I read this summer was The Righteous Mind, by Jonathan Haight. In the first part of the book he demonstrates just how many of our thoughts and opinions are ways to justify our inner reactions. For example, there are a number of political candidates who, every time they open their mouths I cringe or become outraged. Now if you asked me why, I would feel pressed to come up with a reason. After all I am not a bigot who judges people from sheer emotional reaction! I am a rational, thoughtful and—the most cherished of my qualities, *independent* thinker! So I may say, “Well, I don’t like how arrogant he is. I don’t trust her. I think he or she is just representing a narrow group of people and isn’t interested in the good of the whole country.” If I have actually taken the time to read a candidate’s *actual* positions on issues I may say something like, “I disagree with her or his position on immigration, addressing poverty, health care.” But I rarely do.

I agree with Dr. Haight that most, if not all of my thoughts about things begin as an emotion, a reaction—and once in a great while, as an intuition, a whisper from within. The opinions and world views I hold are formed to make sense of these reactions and inclinations so that I can live in our bewildering world.

With this in mind, is it a surprise that the letter of James nails the number one problem of the community of faith as what he calls the “tongue?” Even in the first days of the Christian community the number one destroyer of community was the tongue. By the tongue James means that organ out of which come all manner of hurtful words and destructive not thought

out opinions and judgements. In today's world of often anti-social media, the tongue flies off our fingers and wounds without warning. The past ten years have seen a blossoming of ways the tongue can spread rumor, suspicion, character assassination and all kinds of emotional reactions. Like the old experiment of steel balls on a frictionless surface which can knock against each other indefinitely, the reaction to unreflective words take on a life of their own. Indeed they create the illusion that they actually express the way things *are*. When people say outrageous things there are actually people who believe that what is said is *true*.

James identifies this phenomenon as of the devil. One of the identities of the devil is *the deceiver*. That is, the devil seeks to deceive us into believing a half-truth as the whole truth. The devil does not want us to recognize that all truths are partial truths and that all people carry at least a fingernail bit of truth within them. The devil does not want us to be a community that actually *listens* to one another and believes that the truth is *more whole* in communities of diverse perspectives. Instead the devil wants us to adopt either/or thinking. The devil wants us to become communities where everyone is in lock step with one another, the sole carriers of the truth be it political and especially spiritual truth.

Why is this so? Take a moment to think about this for yourself.

Since I can't stop and ask you, let me share what happened to me. When I asked the question which I just asked you another question popped up: What *doesn't happen* in communities that agree about everything? What happens when there is no voice to offer another point of view? Certainly we can say that the opportunity to learn anything new is severely limited. Instead of real learning we only accept teaching that reinforces what we already believe. This often leads to the illusion that we hold the true vision for life and all who

disagree with us are either deluded or actively subversive. We become with Lucy in Peanuts people who believe quite sincerely that if everyone agreed with us they'd be right.

But at this stage we are not touching the devil's real agenda. The real agenda of the deceiver is to blind us to the shadow side of *our* beliefs. Trust me, every conviction, no matter how virtuous, has a shadow side. Every perspective no matter how valid has flaws and harmful implications. That is why we are called into communities where, thank goodness, there are people who see things differently. To return to Dr. Haight's theory, if most of our stated beliefs are attempts to make sense of our deep reactions and emotions and sometimes whispers from within, the denial of the shadow side blinds us to the source of our stated beliefs. As a result our beliefs become absolute, either/or and, frankly, dangerous. For when I am absolutely right my righteous goals justify whatever means I see fit to impose my views on others. My moral view of history is that most if not all of the terrible devastation visited on humanity by humanity has been done by people who had no shadow side and who were absolutely right.

James' solution is first for us to bridle the tongue. When in doubt say nothing. A number of years ago a friend gave me three questions to ask myself before opening my mouth:

- Does it have to be said?
- Does it have to be said *by me*?
- Does it have to be said by me *now*?

Asking these three questions, if nothing else, buys us time to listen to what is going on within us. It also allows us to get a second opinion. In almost every case there is no need to reply right away. Sometimes there is and it is important not to run away from those moments. But most of the time we do well to seek out someone we trust who will listen and who will ask us to own the shadow side of our emotional reactions; maybe even to recognize the one who

has spoken may bring a message of truth—we just don't happen to like it, or like the way it was presented.

But more importantly, a Christian friend who listens will help us to listen beyond the reaction, beyond the hurt, resentment, jealousy, moral outrage for that most precious of voices: the still, small voice which whispers love and life and peaceful guidance.

I am a Christian in large part because of all the people who have ever lived; I believe that Jesus most clearly listened to and for that whisper. He heard it in the plea of the gentile woman pleading for her child after his less than sympathetic first reaction. He listened all the way to the Cross. He invites us to do the same. Amen.