

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
September 16, 2018, Proper 19B  
Welcome Home!  
James 3: 1-12; Mark 8: 27 - 38  
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's so good to be together this morning as we begin a year long observance of our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ministry here in Nutley. It'll be a time of celebration and hopefully a time of recommitment, a time of recovenanting, as we honor our past and look forward to the shape and content of our ministry into the future and a time to discern ways of living out our invitation to "Come grow with us". So, we're on a journey – and we begin with thinking about, why does the church exist?

In confirmation classes we talk about 3 reasons for the church to be: worship, service, and education. We gather weekly to praise God, to give thanks, to open ourselves for an encounter with God in worship, through prayer, music, hearing the Word, reflections on the Word, even through our offerings of time, treasure and talent. And we constantly look for ways to live out Jesus' commandment to love each other as God loves us – to serve the "least of these" – we've done some wonderful things - making and delivering prayer shawls, by participating in the CROP walk each year, by offering space in our building to community organizations, yoga classes, housing the Food Pantry, feeding the hungry – and again, through our sharing of our treasure with various special offerings through our denomination and locally. How will we engage in even more service in the future?

Because today is the first day of Sunday School classes for this year, we focus on education and this James text is a strange one in our celebration context, isn't it. He cautions us that not many of us should become teachers – maybe some hear that with a sigh of relief – I really don't want to teach Sunday school and here's a reason right out of the Bible to say no. Others are not called to teach a class and that's fine too. We all have different gifts and we're called to use them in a variety of ways: all of our gifts become part of the greater whole of the community of faith, the Body of Christ gathered here at St. Paul's Church.

Anyway, please don't feel guilty about not teaching Sunday School but I don't think James' caution lets us entirely off the hook. I think the caution is that indeed we are all teachers, all the time; our words and even more, our actions, do in fact teach others about what we think is important, what we think is right and wrong, and what we believe about our faith.

And he goes on to caution us about the power of the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. Strong words. And I suspect that we all have first-hand knowledge of the truth of these words – from accounts of bullying and gossip and words hurled at us and at others from the television news. These words can wear us down, can't they.

There are more strong images throughout this passage that everyone can relate to. Fire – did you see those images from Massachusetts on Friday night – houses exploding from a problem with gas lines? Or the pictures of the fires out west, the volcanoes in Hawaii – the power of flames! The image of fire here used to describe the power of the tongue is an especially vivid one for me. Watching what we say is not an easy job – because as James says, wild beasts can be tamed more easily than the human tongue. That old saying, sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me. That's absolutely not true: we know that.

Our words teach. Every word we speak, every action we take is teaching. As we focus on our educational ministry this morning, know that each and every one of us is a teacher.

Maria Harris is one of the foremost Christian educators today, a Roman Catholic laywoman. She says the church IS an educational program. Not that the church HAS an educational program. Also, education is not simply instruction, especially in the form of indoctrination. The reality is education comes from more than formal teaching – it's also worship, community life, service – and participants are not just the children and young people but all of the community. The whole community, our church, is the agent of education by its ways of living together, speaking together, praying together, singing together, worshipping together. And this doesn't happen just here in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings but at choir rehearsals, committee meetings, at the Food Pantry handing out food, at our upcoming Yard Sale, in the kitchen, in hospitals and schools – it happens wherever we are engaging in the ministry of the church, here, and in the midst of the world where the church itself dwells.

Christian education is not just about learning the Christian Story, although that's critical: but it also includes, indeed emphasizes, what we do with that knowledge and learning – how we live the Christian story. The

goal of Christian education is the discovery that no one place is God's special place – God's only place – it's anywhere and everywhere the community meets God.

No time is God's special time – at every moment, God's presence is with us.

No people are God's special people – all people belong to God.

That's the goal of Christian education – and we're all teachers.

What is it that we teach? Not just facts, history, the Bible – we teach in more subtle ways how much we value education – how we arrange the classrooms, by the time we spend, how well we listen, by our supplies and furniture – all those things that surround the educational process as we think of it. And even more important so often – we teach by what we don't say or don't do, by what is missing in our curriculum. The tongue is a fire not only by what we do say but also by what we don't say. The pain of silence, neglect, ignoring is very real – that's powerful.

Our influence as educators is tremendous and we may never know the impact we have on another human being by the smallest word or action. Certainly in the world of a child, we don't know what it is they're hearing or feeling, what they're learning from us, what they're thinking, what their context is – and that's true for adults as well.

I met a 4 year old once and after we'd talked a few minutes, she asked if I was a grandma. It's so fascinating to get inside the mind of a child so I asked her what made her think that. She said, "You have lines in your glasses." You never know what's going on in their minds unless you ask.

James also makes it clear in his letter that we're not perfect, that all of us make mistakes. Don't we know that. Who of us hasn't acknowledged making zillion mistakes, of saying, "if only..." I wonder if the fear of making mistakes, the "if only" is what stops us from taking action. The reality is, both action and inaction teaches too.

It certainly is easier, more comfortable, to take James at his word that not all of us can be teachers. But we are. Even the youngest among us are teachers – they teach us to see things we wouldn't otherwise see. I wouldn't trade my first trip to Disneyworld with my 3 year old niece for anything. The children teach us wonder, excitement, how to play. Don't we yearn to have those gifts of wonder and curiosity revived in ourselves – and that's not just for children, is it – I still remember my grandmother who in her 80s was still full of wonder and curiosity – took her first glider ride with my uncle at 85! No matter how old we are, we have something to teach and something to learn.

So this educational ministry is for sure solidly based in community. We teach the importance of building a faith, of getting into a relationship with God by being here and participating. We teach by modeling behavior not only here at church – but also at home, at school, at work, on the playground, at Shop Rite, wherever we live our lives. Let’s not underestimate the importance of that teaching and learning that’s always going on.

Years ago Ann Landers printed a letter from a woman who quoted an article she’d read, “If there is a simple way to instill in children the qualities that will keep them happy and help them contribute to the world while doing no harm to others, I haven’t found it.”

Another woman challenged that as she wrote of her father who taught her by example: “He had a strong faith in God. If he could help someone in need, he did it. My father taught me honesty, respect, courage, faith, responsibility, and kindness. I hope I can instill the virtues in my children that my Dad taught me. What a difference that makes in life!”

Amen to that....is it any wonder that education is one of the prime ministries of this or any church. We’re all teachers by example, aren’t we. And we need this community to support us, to support each other in our efforts.

James is also right that the tongue is a flame. The damage inflicted by an untamed tongue can be deadly. And he’s also right that it is mighty hard to tame the tongue, to ease the pain that the flame causes. Is there anything more painful than a burn? I don’t think so – this is a profound image.

But we also have another image of flame, of fire that brings us hope. It’s the flame of Pentecost – just as powerful, even more so, than the flames James speaks about. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among the people gathered and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

James tells us that from the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. The flame is deadly but also empowering. The flame in our Bible images both destroys and is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. God among us. The flame with the power to build up the community.

As we celebrate our Homecoming Sunday, our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ministry, as we work to create a learning atmosphere in the church – let us be led by the power of the flame, not destroyed, not burned by it.

Yes, we are all learners and teachers in our faith community – children, youth, adults. Let us rejoice in that. Let us come together and

grow together. And let us celebrate our joy of being faithful to one another in our covenant relationship: may the words of our lips and the dreams of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.