

**Wicked Words • Isaiah 50:4-9; James 3:1-12**  
**Sheth LaRue • September 12, 2021**  
**Aurora First Presbyterian Church**

---

*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* We all know this phrase and, unless you were a bully, you no doubt repeated those words just as I did on the playground...in the classroom...in the grocery store. My mom taught me this phrase in an attempt to shield myself from name calling in a non-violent sort-of way. While this phrase has consoled those of us who have been wounded by words, the author of the epistle of James outright discredits the idea that words don't hurt: "The tongue is a fire"<sup>1</sup> he writes. The tongue, though a small member of the body, "boasts of great exploits"<sup>2</sup> ready at a moment's notice to strike: "How great a forest can be set ablaze by a small fire!"<sup>3</sup>

How great a forest can be set ablaze by a small fire: we've all seen the viral videos of forest fires raging with ferocious frequency in our western states, overcoming all attempts by firefighters of stopping or, at the very least, slowing down the infernos. We've seen the skies above us clouded with smoke from those fires thousands of miles away. We've heard the reports of people and pets, homes and highways utterly destroyed from the result of a small spark. We watch helplessly as those flames engulf whatever they touch and our hearts break as the stories come out of heroic deeds and tragic loss.

We know the power of a small spark and the destruction it can cause, and James, in comparing the words we speak to this small fire, speaks right to our hearts, doesn't he? All James' readers have seen the destruction that actual wildfires can cause, and we have seen the destruction that comes from the spark in our mouths: an unbridled tongue spewing wicked words.

We witnessed how great a forest can be set ablaze by the small fire, watching in disbelief on January 6<sup>th</sup> as former President Donald Trump stood before thousands of his followers, using his words to fan the flames of insurrection. Called to action by Trump's tongue, thousands of his supporters made their way to the Capitol building seeking to overturn his defeat in the 2020 election. As the dust settled, 138 police officers were injured and four officers died by suicide in the months that followed. As of today 639 offenders have been arrested and we are still trying to understand it all. A tongue – a small spark – caused this destruction and death.

On August 18, 1901 the body of Gisela Wild was found under a railroad bridge on the outskirts of our neighboring town of Pierce City. Though there were no eyewitnesses to the crime, suspicion fell on Will Godley, a 32 year old black laborer with a criminal record, and he was quickly arrested. A great forest set ablaze by a small fire, murmurings around town quickly turned into a mob of over one thousand

---

<sup>1</sup> James 3:6

<sup>2</sup> James 3:5

<sup>3</sup> James 3:5

who stormed the jail, removed Godley from his cell and lynched him, his body hung from the balcony of the Lawrence Hotel. The fires burned quickly through the hearts of those present and the white mob, over the course of the next four days, drove out more than thirty black families who fled their homes, abandoning all they owned. A tongue – a small spark – caused this destruction and death.

Human history is full of these small fires causing great destruction: Cambodia's Pol Pot and Uganda's Idi Amin ordering the systemic slaughter of millions of their country's citizens; Jim Jones orchestrating the mass murder-suicide of 918 of his congregants; Osama bin Laden grossly misusing Islamic teaching to kill thousands of Americans; Ravi Zacharias, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Ted Haggard – all Christian teachers whose actions in the world contradicted their words in the pulpit. Words uttered by these people – small fires at the time – caused raging wildfires of destruction and the death of humans and marriages, of compassion and faith. How great a forest can be set ablaze by a small fire!

With our tongues we bless the Lord and with the same tongues we curse our neighbors.<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge Jesus with our lips and then walk out the door and deny him by our lifestyle, perpetuating what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.<sup>5</sup> We prop up lies up as truth across social media and our Christian teachers spew destructive theologies across the airwaves. I'm probably not the only one who would say that it all gets to be so burdensome that, more than just stopping talking, we want to quit everything, move into a cave in some far away desert, and enjoy the utter silence.

We're not called to run away, though, are we? God's gift is in us, right? The Holy Spirit dwells within us and this Spirit is not one that runs off in cowardice and fear; no, this Spirit is a Spirit that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.<sup>6</sup> With the Spirit of God within us we should laugh at the idea of running away, and we should instead run *into* the wildfires burning around us. We should be using our tongues of fire to do some controlled burning in the world – this practice of intentionally setting, monitoring, and extinguishing fires, thereby promoting healthier forests for the future. We should use our tongues to speak God's truth, love, and goodness in the world. We should use our tongues to share the Good News found in Jesus Christ. We should use our voices for those voices around us that are too small, too greatly oppressed, too-often ignored. If James is right in that the tongue is a fire<sup>7</sup> then we should use it to make the world a better place for all of us to live.

We should perform controlled burns like Dr. Martin Luther King who, through speech, nonviolent activism, and civil disobedience, worked for the black community's right to vote, promoted desegregation, advocated for labor rights and the civil rights of millions of abused and oppressed

---

<sup>4</sup> James 3:9-10

<sup>5</sup> Been Simpson, "The Ragamuffin Legacy" Relevant Magazine, April 16, 2013, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/ragamuffin-legacy/>

<sup>6</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7

<sup>7</sup> James 3:6

Americans. Dr. King's controlled burn of the tongue changed the course of America's history and, while his work is yet unfinished, his fires moved us a bit closer to equality and equity for all.

We should perform controlled burns like Reverend William Barber who works tirelessly to "confront the interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism."<sup>8</sup> Continually facing arrest, ridicule, and death threats, Reverend Barber's controlled fires burn for justice and truth.

We should perform controlled burns like Father James Martin who admitted his disappointment in the Catholic community's support of the LGBT community after the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting. Beyond voicing his disappointment Fr. Martin worked diligently across the country seeking *how* the Catholic church could better minister to the LGBT community. While he faces harsh criticism within his own church, Fr. Martin's fires burn for those who have been ignored and abused for too long.

We should perform controlled burns like the ones we've been stoking here at First Presbyterian: we should dig deep into our pockets and our schedules to promote, develop, and operate Moses' Basket, providing diapers and wipes to anyone in need. We should give of our time, talents, and treasures to ensure that Come and Dine can continue to feed our neighbors. We should boldly speak out with those in our community whose voices have little power: for our black and indigenous neighbors who live and work on the edges of society. For our poor and impoverished neighbors too broke and busy working to have time to speak, protest, and march. For our veteran neighbors who are all-too-often ignored and forgotten, yet also too humble and respectful to seek help. For our LGBTQIA+ neighbors who face hate and violence, ridicule and rejection at the hands and voices of their friends and family. We should use our tongues of fire to slowly and carefully burn our community so something better, something greater can rise from the ashes.

Friends, our tongues are small, powerful fires: how great a forest is set ablaze by such small fires. We can use these fires to further ourselves, to further our own agendas, and destroy our neighbors. With these fires we can curse our neighbors who are made in the very likeness of that God.<sup>9</sup> If we claim we walk in the way of Christ then let's "be clear about what we are for, about whom we are for."<sup>10</sup> You were made to do so much more than to burn your neighbors and yourselves. Is the word of God showing up in the flesh of your life? Are you speaking the truth of the gospel with your tongues of fire, living out the truth of the gospel by loving your neighbor as yourself? Curses and blessings out of the same mouth<sup>11</sup> - which will you give to the least of these among you?

---

<sup>8</sup> "About the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival" Poor People's Campaign, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/>

<sup>9</sup> James 3:9

<sup>10</sup> Martha L. Moore-Keish, *James*, Kindle Version (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 127.

<sup>11</sup> James 3:7-10, The Message