

## **Sermon: September 12, 2021**

### **“Wicked Words”**

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Scriptures: James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

When I was at Grace UCC in downtown Frederick, I had the good fortune and blessing of working with Rev. Dr. Rob Apgar-Taylor and his annual Broadway-themed worship series. He does something very similar to what I did with August at the Movies—drawing theological lessons from musicals. If I had a better voice and a spouse with an acting background with a voice like Rob’s spouse, I would probably have tried to take up that mantle. Alas, none of those things are true for me and movies are more my thing, so that’s what I do.

That said, I’d like to go on record as saying that I love a good musical. One of my favorites is the smash hit musical “Wicked” which flips the script on the Wizard of Oz story, taking us back to the school days of the characters and showing us much more of the “wicked witch” Elphaba’s story. I love stories that upturn our expectations (which, I think, is one of the things that appeals to me about Jesus’s story, completely flipping the script for the world—making God’s kingdom one in which the powerful are brought low and the low are lifted up).

In “Wicked,” Elphaba’s story is told with a great deal of empathy and we see a turning of the tables on who is the “good gal” in the story and who is the ... not-so-good-gal. Elphaba, whose skin has a green hue to it and who has been feared for her power, tries to let herself be molded into a good, popular witch like Glinda, but realizes through the course of the story that

she cannot and should not accept limits placed on her by a society bent on making her fit in when she was born to stand out. It's a story close to the hearts of many outcasts and one I think Jesus, the one who loved and served those on the margins, must smile on.

“Wicked” teaches a lesson important for our young people to hear: that they are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of the loving, Creator God. So often, we try to bend our children to fit our conceptions of what they should or should not be. Much of this bending and molding occurs through what we say. Our two scripture readings today remind us of the importance of the words we choose and the beliefs we hold and act upon.

In today's section of his epistle, James the Just gives an exhortation on the dangers hidden in our speech—particularly for those who teach. But James does not limit teaching to those with “teacher” spelled out explicitly in their job description. When we think of teachers, we often imagine folks who stand before groups of people and impart knowledge gleaned from books. But teaching is less clearly defined than we think, especially when it comes to teaching that is based in our faith. Aren't parents, in many respects, teachers? What about our mentors? Kathy Dawson, in her commentary on this passage, reminds us that in our lives, we all will have been taught and we will all have been teachers.

Thought of in this light, this passage from James takes on new meaning. It's not just an exhortation to people who identify as teachers, but also to any who would teach—especially in the church. James writes, “How great is a forest set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members (the taught)” and, James tells us, it has power. It has the power to bring about a world of injustice and a stain upon all it

touches. Put simply, James is telling us, in part, that the words we speak... they matter.

I always tell my kids that they should choose their words carefully because words mean something. They have influence. James writes, "with the tongue, we bless the Lord... and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God." Our words can build up or they can tear down. They can speak love and blessing, or they can speak anger and hurt. The words you choose have an impact on those in your orbit. They can be the difference between someone having a good day or a terrible one. Between a good mood and a bad mood. It can mean the difference between whether someone feels good about themselves or thinks of themselves as worthless.

Because the words we say linger, don't they? Who among us can't think back to our school days and remember a hurtful, throw-away comment from a classmate? I remember a comment made to me at a friend's house when I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, about how I looked in a bathing suit, it was a comment this person probably has *no* recollection of, but that comment began to shape how I thought of myself in bathing suits or anything else, for that matter, and it still sometimes informs how I see myself today. A simple, unkind comment can leave scars that never really go away.

Words are especially important when they are addressed to our young people, our children, the most tender hearts among us. Today, we will bless the backpacks of our children who bravely walk into school buildings every day and whose precious ears are subject to so many, many words. Those words they hear can teach them many things, they can help them

gain self-confidence and independence, but they can also harm. They can leave scars.

And our children aren't just hearing words at school. They aren't just being taught by their assigned teachers. They're being taught by parents and guardians, by siblings and other family members. By coaches and pastors and church leaders. And they aren't just learning from those who are intentionally teaching them, they're *watching* everything we grown people do. They hear what we say, whether we direct it to them or not. They learn from our example. They see how we carry ourselves when we are angry or impassioned. They hear how we talk about people we disagree with. They hear what we say about people behind their backs. They hear how we talk to and about ourselves and it informs how they will talk to and about themselves. They're learning from everything we do.

James' discussion here is, of course, broader than how we talk to our children, but as I prepared my sermon for Rally Sunday, I kept coming back to our kids. I kept seeing the faces of the children of Trinity UCC, the ones on the soccer fields with my kids, the ones I have coached in softball and lacrosse, the kids I used to teach as a substitute teacher. I kept coming back to the faces of my sons and thinking about the words they have heard in their lives and the words they will hear in the years to come. And I kept thinking about the climate we live in right now. I kept thinking of the tongues of fire shouting at one another across dividing lines. The tongues who have made simple differences of opinion battle lines across which war will be waged. The tongues speaking words of curse and hatred and anger. The tongues that, like it or not, are, indeed, teaching our children as they watch wide-eyed from the side-lines of culture wars.

So, then, you might ask, Pastor Jessica, what are we to do when we disagree? Is James telling us that we should be silent? That we should live in isolation and never engage in debate or discussion across the lines that divide us? Should we sit back and let perceived injustices stand?

No. James is not saying silence and isolation are the answer, he's advocating, rather, that we examine our speech and control our tongues. He's telling us that, even though it may be hard, we who teach in any way are charged to lead the way in cultivate spaces in which people are safe to share dissenting views.

In our gospel lesson for today, which deserves many sermons all on its own, Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He's not telling Peter to go away. He's not banishing him, he's literally telling him to follow him on the true way and not to follow the false, divisive way of the world. He's telling Peter follow the way of the gospel. In the same way, James is telling us to, in the words of Kathy L. Dawson, "dedicate our tongues to the language of God," so that "our actions will follow."

In the musical "Wicked," the words others directed toward Elphaba shape her to such an extent that she isn't able to see who she is. By the end, she finally realizes that following the way of Glinda is the false way for her because she can't contort herself into being someone she wasn't made to be. When she stops listening to the tongues of those who tell her to be what she isn't, she begins to hear the words of her spirit, telling her to be the person she was created to be. Let us teach our children with words that

bless and honor the unique, beautiful creations they are. Let us teach our children with the language of God, showing them with our actions that who it is we follow. Let us control our tongues in such a way that what our children hear is blessing rather than curse. Let us be the people Jesus never has to order to get behind him, because we live in a way that shows him that's exactly where we are. Amen.