

James 3: 1-10

Here's Mud in your Eye—the things we say

Delivered September 13, 2009

One of the very best things about our Coveseville Child Development Center, here at Cove; one of the things that warms the cockles of my heart, is naptime. Most of the day our preschool is in very high energy mode, but come naptime, somehow Coveseville Child Development Teachers are able to quiet those little super charged bodies. Naptime starts at 1 p.m. By 1:10 most of these pint-sized whirling dervishes have morphed into little cherubs, lying on their cots, holding a favorite blanket or teddy bear, and dreaming, no doubt, about some of the great adventures they have already experienced that day—digging in the sandbox, finger painting, or listening to the reading of *George and the Man with the Yellow Hat* (Remember that one?). Miss Yvonne, the former director of the Center, though, will tell you that these little angels aren't always what they seem.

As a case in point, one naptime, she was lying on the floor between two cots, patting the back of one of the wee ones. Her own eyes were half-closed, as she rested as comfortably as is possible on our hard linoleum floor. She heard one of her "little dears" pronounce the N word. He said, "N word. My granddaddy says they aren't worth anything." Yvonne's eyelids flew back and she said, just to make sure, "What did you say?" He said it again. Wide awake now, Yvonne stood up, walked over to the little boy's cot, took his hand and led him to an upstairs classroom. Then she and the little boy sat down at a kid-sized table for a serious talk:

"Do you know what you just said?"

"Uh Uh."

"You said a very bad word just now. That word describes black people. Do you know what that word is?"

"N___?" Then he added, "That's what my granddaddy says."

"Well, you tell your granddaddy that's a bad word. It hurts people when you use that word."

Yvonne says that up to this point the little boy just seemed a little confused. But then, Yvonne, who is an African American, laid the truth on him:
"I'm black."

The little boy said, "You are not!" Yvonne could tell it really upset the little boy to think that his beloved teacher was black.

"Yes, I AM black," Yvonne answered back. Then she went on to explain that some black people have very dark skin and some have skin that is not so dark but they are still black people.

Finally, Yvonne said, fear passed across the little boy's face. After all, he had just insulted his teacher, who was about 3 feet taller and many pounds heavier and there was no one around to play interference.

But of course, Yvonne, being Yvonne, hugged the little boy, assured that a lesson had been learned. The boy went back downstairs to his cot and naptime and Yvonne sat at the kid-size table waiting for her heartbeat to revert back to a normal rhythm.

James says, “It only takes a spark to set off a forest fire. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it.”

This little boy, with one wrongly used word, temporarily anyway, ruined his preschool world, turned harmony into chaos, and threw deserved mud on the reputation of his grandfather, I’d say. If there was smoke, it was probably coming out of Yvonne’s ears.

I initially chose this text for today because we are back to our regular schedule of once a week church school. Then too, for the next ten weeks or so, Walter Mehring and I will be teaching a confirmation class for our four confirmands. I also chose this text because school is back in session and I thought it would resonate with those of us who are teachers in the secular world. But really, as I thought about this week’s message, I decided that James wasn’t JUST talking about church school teachers and secular world teachers. I think James was talking about any one of us who holds a position of influence—at an office, maybe, training a new employee, or babysitting the next door neighbor’s child. And as the story about the little boy at The Covesville Child Development Center indicates, we definitely hold positions of influence as beloved grandparents, aunts and uncles, and it almost goes without saying, as parents. So this passage is directed if not all, at **practically** all of us.

Now, what James has to say is not what those in positions of influence would probably like to hear. I mean, according to James, power is not all it’s cracked up to be. You can’t help but misuse or abuse it, nearly every time, says James. We miss the mark, more than we succeed. We make a mess of things. We say one thing and do another and end up being hypocrites. We speak untruths, and we spread idle gossip, which is a strange phrase I’ve never fully understood, because gossip, of course, is never idle. In my own experience “idle” gossip travels at warp speed damaging reputations, spewing forth misinformation and meanness. Idle gossip is an oxymoron if ever there was one.

This might be a good place to throw in a quote I learned this week, attributed to Oscar Wilde. He said, “If you can’t say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me.”

Even though we know we will fail, still we teach. We even **crave** positions of influence, because...because... I don’t know why. Maybe we teach because power is attractive and if you have it enough, it becomes addictive. That could be. But there are other reasons—good reasons, that we teach. Maybe we teach because we think we can change the world for the better. Yes, it is true as James said, a wrongly spoken word can start a forest fire; However a rightly spoken word can warm a heart. Yes, say the wrong thing and you can ruin a world, but string the right words together and you can begin to heal the world. Yes, gossip throws mud on a reputation, but a word of encouragement can make someone sit up straighter, hold a head higher, and even set sights on high achievement.

And that's what I want to end with today. I want to end by giving you an example of how the right words can change a life for the better. The example comes from a radio show I heard on NPR. Talk of the Nation, hosted by Neal Conan. Mr. Conan was interviewing one of the coauthors of a book called Consequential Strangers: the power of people who don't seem to matter, but really do. Now a consequential stranger, according to the coauthor, is someone who holds a position of influence in your life, even though that person is a complete stranger—which sounds almost as oxymoronic as idle gossip, doesn't it? Consequential stranger. However, having listened to the entirety of the show, I tend to agree with what the authors have to say. Consequential strangers **CAN** influence a life. During the call-in portion of the show, a woman named Mary Ann phoned in to say that she herself had been influenced by what was said or actually, in this case, written by a consequential stranger. It happened like this:

Mary Ann was working for the Alaska Court system in Anchorage. She was a legal technician. That meant that she worked up files and drafted orders and sent them to judges across the state. She said that she might as well have been sending those files and orders into a black hole. She never met the judges on whose files she worked; She never received feedback—good or bad. Then one day she picked up an order from a relatively new judge named Rene Gonzales. At the time he was a superior court judge. There was a sticky note attached to the order. It began: “Has anyone told you how wonderful you are?” And then the note went on to say how much Judge Gonzales appreciated her good work. Mary Ann says that at the time she didn't have a college degree. She didn't think very highly of herself. But that note, was the kick in the pants she needed. Mary Ann decided to further her education. She has now finished college, gone to graduate school and at present, she's working on her doctorate.

Which leads me to conclude that you don't have to be a teacher or a boss, or a parent or grandparent to have a position of influence in the life of another. Each of us can at least be a consequential stranger—which is reason enough to watch what we say. Mary Ann is proof that although it only takes a spark to set off a forest fire, it also only takes a spark to launch a rocket into space, or light a fire under a person with dreams of something better for herself. May it be so for you as for me, in our positions of influence in the lives we lead. Amen