
Moving Forward
Wesley Mimico United Church
Sept 13, 2015
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 3:1-12 and Mark 8:27-38

How many of us grew up with the idea that “If you can’t say something nice about someone, don’t say anything at all”? And what do you think? What do you think of that advice?

[discussion - do you like it? do you use it?]

There is no doubt that there is much truth in the statement. As we read in James, the tongue can be a powerful tool - or weapon - and clearly operates better when under control. I’m sure we could all share stories personal where we have been on the receiving end of an abusive tongue, or stories where we ourselves said something - or said something in a certain way - that we ourselves later regretted.

If you want some fun this week, re-read the passage from James in other translations. At Bible Study this week we enjoyed the variety of words among our group. In the version of the Bible called *The Message* it says, “It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. 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.”¹ Strong words indeed. And interesting that this is the lectionary reading on the same Sunday that we have a congregational meeting!

The whole idea of “controlling your tongue” is expressed in other ways too. How about these takes on the idea:

- “Words are free. It's how you use them that may cost you”.

¹ James 3:5-6, *The Message*

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- “The tongue has no bones, but it's strong enough to break someone's heart”.

And with a different emphasis:

- “The rumours that you hear about me are as true as the rumours that I hear about you”.

There are other versions of the expression of course, some of which I do not endorse! For example, “If you can’t say something nice about someone, say it in a language that they don’t understand”. Or, “If you can’t say something nice about someone, say something witty and sarcastic”. Or even more cruelly, “If you can’t say something nice about someone, just point and laugh”.

Well, I don’t like any of those alternative versions. But I do feel that the original version needs to be updated. I think I understand the original intent ... which I imagine is to reduce negativity when it serves no purpose other than puffing someone’s ego. But that’s actually my issue with the statement. The statement is supposed to limit negativity, and yet, the statement itself is completely negative. It only tells us what we should *not* do. It’s not positive, it is just non-negative.

So what might a positive version of this idea look like? Believe it or not, I couldn’t find any positive versions online, so I had to make one up. Here it is: “If you can’t say something nice about somebody, you haven’t tried hard enough.” I think “controlling the tongue” needs not only to include not saying negative things, it must also include saying positive things. No by lying or course, but by being more completely authentic, and by realizing that if we can’t be positive about someone, that fact probably says more about us than it says about the other person.

I can’t say that I particularly enjoy election campaigns. But one thing I do look forward to at election time is the “Vote Compass”. I hope you have used this or will use it. It’s an online tool designed to ask your opinion on specific issues, and you get to see how you align with the different parties on those issues. I think the intended consequence is to help you decide who you should vote for, as well as gathering public opinion. But there is also an unintended consequence - for me at least. Because every time I go through the process, I am forced to realize that there is at least 1 thing that I actually

appreciate about each one of the parties. Imagine that. If I try hard enough - if I make the effort - I can find something to appreciate about each one of the parties.

[discussion is being non-negative enough?]

Of course, since what I am advocating is authentic, helpful, healing conversation, then I suppose I could start right now myself.

Because of the way the timing unfolded, there are many of you that I haven't seen in worship since I made my announcement about my leaving Mimico. Not only that, but in my reflections over the summer, some things have become more clear to me as well.

I have felt warmly embraced by many of you who told me that you don't want me to leave. It's always nice to be loved! And it's mutual. I don't *want* to leave you either.

I think we have accomplished a great deal together in the past 3 years. I feel that Wesley has a stronger spiritual sense now, compared to when I arrived here, and also, a better sense of grace. I don't mean that we *understand* spirit and grace better. I mean that we *live* them better! We have built stronger community here. And that deepening sense of both spirit and grace has happened in spite of our many transitions, our moving into this space, our trials and struggles with many practical issues, all of the uncertainties around our redevelopment project, and numerous personal transitions and issues. I feel very good about our accomplishments together, and I hope that you do too.

Many things have contributed to that of course. I love the "cozy" worship we share here. The congregational retreats have been wonderful. I am in awe every time that someone shares a very personal part of their life journey with me, or with a group. We are all connected, and usually in positive ways.

As you know, there are different approaches to ministry. Some ministers work through structures and programs. I trust that you notice I have taken a different approach. An approach which is now considered the "modern" approach. [For the first time in my life I'm "in style"] To me, ministry is all about relationships, not programs. And that ministry of relationship has worked very well here. My view of ministry as relationship

has helped create that deepening of spirit and grace here. But relationships always require 2 players. And that deepening of spirit and grace was only possible because of you and your varied responses. You created the environment for your own growth. You should be proud of that. And that accomplishment of yours will not leave you when I move to Rexdale. It is your gift. It is you.

I have some discomfort myself around the fact that our relationships will change soon. But I look forward to growth in you and in in me through this coming change. And - to be completely transparent - I have not left. I have not mentally or spiritually “checked out” from Wesley. I am here for September and October. More than that, I plan to *enjoy* the time we still have together. And so I need to ask each of you ... is there anything else we need to do together before I leave? Reflect of that in the coming days. And let me know. I mean that for “you” as a congregation, and for “you” as an individual. We else do we need to do? (One more retreat). If there is a conversation you want to have with me ... I’m still here.

Following this service, we will have a congregational meeting. The meeting will cover a few things, but one issue is to approve the documents you need in order to begin your search for a new minister. It’s a time to consider what ministry leadership you need for your future. But it’s also a time to reflect on who you are, where you are, and where you want to go next.

And so, in the spirit of James, during that meeting I encourage everyone to speak your own truth from your heart. To make the effort to say something positive, not just avoid speaking negative words. And above all ... be yourself. You are all that you need to be.

Approving documents and selecting a search committee may feel like a little thing. But that “little thing” will help steer you into your future. That “little thing” will help you move forward.

Amen.