

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 12, 2021, The 16th Sunday After Pentecost/The 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Proverbs 11:5-14, 30; James 3:1-12

I.A.L.A.K. and SHMILY

When I was in 7th grade, I went to church summer camp. On the first morning we were all given a name tag that read: "IALAK." "I-A-L-A-K," which stood for "I Am Loving and Kind." There we all sat with our IALAK name tags made out of construction paper, hanging around our necks on yarn. We were invited during the coming week of camp to work at being loving and kind in everything we did. In our Bible Studies, game times, crafts, the dining room and at camp fires we were supposed to pay attention to how we treated people. But every time we weren't loving and kind to someone, we had to tear a piece of our IALAK name tag off and give it to the person we'd been mean to.

I'm sure there was a lesson about how Jesus cared for people and that we were supposed to be caring like him too. But I must confess I don't remember the lesson, all I can remember these many years later was feeling incredibly smug, knowing that I would definitely have my IALAK name tag at the end of the week.

Except by 7th grade, I was known for being the queen of sarcasm.

You don't realize at 13 how many times you talk about someone else, not always in the best ways, until all your so-called friends around you are trying to catch you at it!

Needless to say, by the next day most of us were wearing tattered name tags, having become very quick judges of each other's words and actions. Most of us had been reduced to I.A.—I am! Which is a sermon in itself!

We had to grudgingly admit that being IALAK took more work than we thought it would.

What our Camp Counselors knew, and we didn't, was that most of us would quickly fail at keeping our IALAK name tags. Like the author of James, they knew that our words and our speech were powerful, and not always easy to control. Like James, they wanted to push us to think about how living as Christ-followers takes work. Being a disciple takes paying attention; even paying attention to every word we speak.

But James didn't write these words about the tongue just to hand out some rules about being nice to people, or being "loving and kind." These words are about the life of faith!

When James wrote, he wanted people pay attention to the whole picture.

James is a book known for saying that if we're not using our faith, then our faith is dead.

James believed other people should be able to look at the way we live, and the way we speak, and know that we follow Jesus Christ.

Part of what he wrote about was living as wise people. James was like the writers of the Psalms and Proverbs who often wrote these words: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." And by calling us to fear God, they are not calling us to be afraid of God, they calling us to have reverence for God, recognizing that God is more important and bigger than any other part of our lives, and this calls for our respect.

(other Wisdom Literature, Bartlett, p. 62.1.9)

So, like those other writers of wisdom, James says wisdom starts with God and then our wisdom is seen in:

How we speak

How we care for those in distress and
 What we let into our lives (meaning: what people, what thoughts & beliefs, what experiences,
 what choices we let into our lives).

(See Bartlett, p. 64.1.2)

James knew that words are powerful.

I don't know how many of you grew up with the expression: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me?" (hands)

This is one of the biggest lies we were ever handed.

And many of us knew it at the time, because the words did hurt. But we were encouraged to be brave and pretend they didn't.

Words can be life-giving and words can kill.

Words can encourage or they can break spirits.

Words can welcome and words can push away.

Words can heal and words can destroy.

Words can be as gentle as caress and as violent as a punch in the stomach.

And we know this don't we? We know words are powerful.

We've watched words divide families, and bring families together.

We've watched words lead a church to split, and heal a church that's broken.

We've watched words be used to enslave people, and to free people.

In these months of the pandemic, we have seen words about masking, and vaccinating, and care for others cause such destructive divisions.

What James says to us this morning is: pay attention to your power. Realize how powerful your words are; don't be naïve about what your words do to those in your life, for good or for evil.

James gives us some pictures to show us what this looks like.

He says you can put a bridle on a horse and guide it where you want it to go. But get into a disagreement with someone and your uncontrolled words can be a match that sets off a forest fire.

And we know this. We know it in our friendships, in our marriages, with people at school, with our parents and with our children, and even here at church.

And truth be told it's often hardest to watch our words, and use our powerful words well, with the people who know us best and who care for us the most.

Most of us, at one time or another, have stood in the midst of a forest fire started by words that we would do anything to put out, but the words are out there now and the fire is raging. And the fire was started by us.

Proverbs 18:21 puts it this way: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

James says every animal we know can be tamed by human beings, but in all of human history no one has been able to tame the tongue.

It can just go wild without any warning.

In fact, he says, our words have the power to set the cycles of nature on fire.

We are powerful people with powerful words! That tube of toothpaste I showed the children is one of my favorite reminders of this.

James says to us this morning; don't let those words out in the first place. Pay attention, live as wise, faith-filled people, don't stand there with a plate of toothpaste.

James doesn't give us any break at all, having given these and other examples he writes:

With our tongues we bless God

and we curse people who are made in the likeness of that same God.

In James 1:26 that we looked at two weeks ago James writes: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless."

OK, so now that we are feeling just a bit battered by James' words, what do we do about it?

If blessing and cursing can both come from us, and we've seen it happen, do we give up?

What I'd like to suggest is that maybe those camp counselors long ago gave me a bigger gift than I realized at the time when they put that IALAK name tag around my neck.

Maybe we could put the letters IALAK somewhere we can see them each day. Maybe they're on our mirror in the bathroom, in our wallet, on the dashboard of our car, inside a notebook at school, our locker, taped to the fridge. And when we see that word, we pray: "With God's Help IALAK." With God's help I *am* loving and kind.

Maybe it becomes our catch phrase that we say under our breath instead of saying the first words that pop into our heads in tense times: "With God's Help IALAK." This may sound like a silly game, but if we are going to practice being wise, maybe some playfulness is needed too.

I also believe the other thing we do when we are practicing using our powerful words wisely is to learn from the wise people around us. Many years ago, I read a story with another made-up word. The word is "SHMILY," S-H-M-I-L-Y, "SHMILY." This story was written Laura Jeanne Allen, writing about her grandparents Alice and Anthony:

My grandparents were married for over half a century, and played their own special game from the time they had met each other. The goal of their game was to write the word "shmily" in a surprise place for the other to find. They took turns leaving "shmily" around the house, and as soon as one of them discovered it, it was their turn to hide it once more.

They dragged "shmily" with their fingers through the sugar and flour containers to await whoever was preparing the next meal. They smeared it in the dew on the windows overlooking the patio where my grandma always fed us warm, homemade pudding with blue food coloring.

"Shmily" was written in the steam left on the mirror after a hot shower, where it would reappear bath after bath. At one point, my grandmother even unrolled an entire roll of toilet paper to leave "shmily" on the very last sheet. There was no end to the places "shmily" would pop up.

Little notes with "shmily" scribbled hurriedly were found on dashboards and car seats, or taped to steering wheels. The notes were stuffed inside shoes and left under pillows. "Shmily" was written in the dust upon the mantel and traced in the ashes of the fireplace.

This mysterious word was as much a part of my grandparents' house as the furniture. It took me a long time before I was able to fully appreciate my grandparents' game. Skepticism has kept me from believing in true love ----one that is pure and enduring.

However, I never doubted my grandparents' relationship. They had love down pat. It was more than their flirtatious little games; it was a way of life. Their relationship was based on a devotion and passionate affection which not everyone is lucky enough to experience. Grandma and Grandpa held hands every chance they could. They stole kisses as they bumped into each other in their tiny kitchen.

They finished each other's sentences and shared the daily crossword puzzle and word jumble... Before every meal they bowed their heads and gave thanks, marveling at their blessings: a wonderful family, good fortune, and each other.

But there was a dark cloud in my grandparents' life: my grandmother had breast cancer. The disease had first appeared ten years earlier. As always, Grandpa was with her every step of the way. He comforted her in their yellow room, painted that way so that she could always be surrounded by sunshine, even when she was too sick to go outside.

Now the cancer was again attacking her body. With the help of a cane and my grandfather's steady hand, they went to church every morning. But my grandmother grew steadily weaker until, finally, she could not leave the house anymore. For a while, Grandpa went to church alone, praying for God to watch over his wife. Then one day, what we all dreaded finally happened. Grandma was gone.

"SHMILY" There it was again---scrawled in bright yellow ink on the pink ribbons of my grandmother's funeral bouquet. As the crowd thinned and the last mourners turned to leave, my aunts, uncles, cousins and other family members came forward and gathered around Grandma one last time.

Grandpa stepped up to my grandmother's casket and, taking a shaky breath, he began to sing to her very softly. Through his tears and grief, the old song came, a deep throaty lullaby. Shaking with my own sorrow, I will never forget that moment. For I knew that, although I couldn't begin to fathom the depth of their love, I had been privileged to witness its unmatched beauty.

"S-H-M-I-L-Y-----See How Much I Love You!"

"IALAK" and "SHMILY,"

with God's help, two powerful sets of words that can help us change the world, through faith!

~ The Author is Laura Jeanne Allen who wrote "SHMILY" about her grandparents, Alice and Anthony McAndrews of Rochester, New York ~ See for full story: <http://www.52best.com/index.asp>

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, pp. 62-66, "Theological Perspective," Mark Douglas

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They finished each other's sentences and shared the daily crossword puzzle and word jumble. My grandma whispered to me about how cute my grandpa was, how handsome and old he had grown to be. She claimed that she really knew "how to pick 'em." Before every meal they bowed their heads and gave thanks, marveling at their blessings: a wonderful family, good fortune, and each other.

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