

Pastor Emily Slade
James 3.1-12, 1 Corinthians 13.1-7
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We are a church with diverse viewpoints. That is something rare and to be nurtured, not abandoned. At the same time, because of the various viewpoints, it can be tempting to avoid difficult subjects altogether. But doing so risks silencing the witness of the Church's about the most important issues of our day.

I understand that to speak on the climate in our country right now is to risk offence. Please know that I have prepared for today with extreme care, but I am also very much a human vessel. As always, any failure is mine. God's word continues to be a true and faithful guide. Above all, I hope that in all these words the Spirit might move to reveal truths to us today. And so, I invite you to pray with me as I offer the prayer I always do before the message. . .

Prayer

Words matter. Authors use words to create entire worlds like Narnia or Middle Earth or Panem, places where readers lose themselves to adventures. Leaders use words to move people to action: "I have a dream. . ." "Ask not what your country can do for you. . ." "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall. . ."

As Christians, we believe that God's vocalization brought this world into being. "God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." We believe God spoke definitively in Jesus, whom the Gospel of John describes as the Word of God made flesh.

At church as preschoolers, we learned, "oh be careful little tongue what you say. . ." As teenagers, our mothers would warn us, "watch your mouth," when we were on the verge of disrespect. And every one of us has spoken a word in anger that we wish we could take back, knowing we cannot undo its damage.

Words matter. Words have power to create realities and to lead to action, for good or for bad.

Right now, it seems our entire country needs a motherly, "watch your mouth." Or maybe, "watch your tone." Or perhaps we all need a good, "go to your room" to slow down construction on the kind of world our words are building.

We can't agree on much these days except that this is not the world we want for ourselves or for our children. No one likes things the way they are, save an unreasonable, nihilistic few. I'm ignoring that small fringe of people today. (They need a different sermon, anyway!)

No reasonable person enjoys the constant vitriol and turmoil of our current climate, let alone the violence that breaks our hearts again and again. None of us wants school days disrupted by the sound of bullets nor by the necessary drills of what

to do if, God forbid, it were to happen here. None of us wants political activists shot in cold blood, governor's mansions set on fire, lawmakers' spouses beaten with hammers, representatives shot during Congressional baseball games, or the Congress cowering in fear as the Capitol is overrun. We may not agree on much, but no one wants to live this way.

But there's something else we, at least partially, agree on amid all the upheaval. And that's that, "they started it." Now, we can't agree on who the "they" is, but we know for sure, "it isn't me or anyone I voted for."

If it weren't so serious, social media would almost be comical right now. It's a bunch of fully-grown people using memes to say, "I know you are but what am I?" and "I'm rubber, you're glue" back and forth at each other. Instead of seeking understanding or common ground, social media is like a gladiatorial arena featuring weaponry of anger, strawmen, and willful misunderstanding. While curiosity, nuance, and the complexity of truth are nowhere to be found.

Somewhere along the line, this country began trading meaningful dialogue for soundbites, cheap shots, and anything that will stick it to our perceived opponent. Where real conversation might lead to deeper understanding or even cooperation, these quick hits are instead designed to inflame. And they *have* proven effective at escalating tension.

What is more, we have disregarded the many "off ramps" we could have taken—opportunities to confront the ramifications of this trade and change course. Instead, time and again we have pressed on, racing to see who could generate the most anger. It doesn't matter at this point who started it—we're all so tangled up in it now that responsibility is shared.

Our outrage has become currency—generating clicks, boosting television ratings, spurring donations, and driving people to the polls. It is profitable for some for us to stay mad at each other. So far, we have been willing participants in our own exploitation.

The recent killing of right-wing political activist, Charlie Kirk is a sobering example. The man was gunned down in cold blood while engaging with college students on Utah Valley University's campus. Again, rational people agree that this was a horrific act.

But instead of sitting even a moment in the grief that we have become a nation where such a thing could happen, Kirk's death instantly became a proxy war in which there was no neutrality. Everyone must choose a side.

But choosing sides was not as simple as the obvious, "yes, this brutal murder was wrong." No, partisans demanded each and every person and corporation commit to either speaking out against Charlie Kirk's politics or to elevating him to near-sainthood.

That a human being's violent murder became another in a series of exhausting litmus tests in American politics is shameful, a stain on our country. But it is the direct result of words that have shaped the reality we now live in, words that have insisted those who vote differently or live differently or speak differently hate and want to destroy this country.

Words matter.

The Apostle Paul is no stranger to fractured communities. In 1 Corinthians, he urges the divided Corinthians to relate to one another in love—love that mirrors the love Christ shows for the Church. I invite Sally to read our second passage for us.

Read 1 Corinthians 13.1-7

None of this sounds like the way our world speaks right now. Though, to be fair, the world never signed on to living by these expectations. But you and I did. The Church did.

And we cannot afford to be another noisy gong. (We have plenty of those already.) Our words cannot be just another clanging cymbal. When Christians participate in the “cheap shot economy,” we fail to live up to Jesus’ call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If words build worlds, then we are meant to use ours to break ground on building God’s kingdom. We are meant to speak in a way that is patient and kind, rejoicing only in the truth, not in wrongdoing.

Can our words, spoken responsibly and in love, disrupt society’s habit of provoking, humiliating, and mocking opposing views? What might that look like?

Maybe it looks like patiently asking questions of those with whom we disagree. Maybe it looks like correcting misinformation with kindness rather than ridicule. Paradoxically, using words lovingly might also look like *not* speaking at all as we wait for more information before drawing conclusions.

It’s not only the words we speak we must consider, but also the words we believe about one other. In our current climate, everything seems to get sorted into the binary—one side or the other. Call it left/right, call it red/blue, call it whatever you want, but I think you know what I’m talking about.

When someone on “the other side” says or does something extreme, we can be tempted to believe everyone on “that side” aligns with those words or actions. We make the leap from “one person said this” to “all of them must believe this” — and suddenly everyone becomes a stand-in for the most extreme version of their “side.” This is far from “rejoicing in the truth,” as love would dictate. It’s closer to reveling in conjecture!

What is more, within this twisted logic, we turn it back on ourselves, suspecting that other people are holding *us* responsible for the worst views and actions of people on “our side.” We become paranoid that: “he must be thinking I’m a terrible person.”

Do you know what I’m talking about here? It’s exhausting!

No wonder we can't talk to each other well!

Friends, we must not succumb to amnesia about one another, forgetting what we know to be true. We have long lived together peacefully. We must resist those who would try to convince us our neighbors are actually our enemies. We must beware of anyone who wants to flatten their marvelous particularity into some nameless, faceless, nefarious "they."

They are not "they." "They" are the teacher who worked with your child until he finally grasped long division—and then celebrated him like he'd won the Superbowl. "They" are the nurse who tended faithfully to your loved one in the hospital. "They" are the neighbor who feeds your cat while you're out of town.

"They" are the scientist who ran an experiment that failed, and failed, and failed, until it finally succeeded and then *ran it once more*, because scientific inquiry requires reproducibility, and *then* submitted it for peer review before it could be published.

Our neighbors are not our enemies. Our experience confirms this! But even if we decide someone is, in fact, an enemy, our responsibility remains the same as followers of Christ. "You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Friends, I do not mean to be Pollyanna-ish about this. There are real problems in this world, and there are beliefs and rhetoric out there that do real harm. The church must not back down from our responsibility to boldly speak out on behalf of God's kingdom values. But speaking boldly is not the same as being inflammatory, trolling, or "owning" your opponent.

We all have occasion to repent for times we were a noisy gong, and God is gracious to forgive us. But we must keep front and center that we are called to be different, to relate to people the way Jesus did.

Through speech, God created the world. The very Word of God became flesh and lived among us, revealing God's nature to us. And we are called to use our words to shape a world that reflects God's values, speaking words of truth on behalf of the plight of the poor, the disenfranchised, and those on the margins. And we are called to do all of this in love. Our efforts may not snap the world out of the nonsense, but it will demonstrate an alternative—that it does not have to be this way.

Paul tells us that "love endures all things." We know this is always true of God's love for us. Let us hold on in hope that our love for one another will endure even this difficult time in our country. As far as it depends on us, let us build our part of this world with words of hope and peace.