

Walking the Walk, Talking the Talk
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James 3: 1-12, Mark

If you happen to be looking for some good old fashion pretentious, self-righteousness, you had need look no further than Dana Carvey's portrayal of the "Church Lady" on *Saturday Night Live*. Are you familiar with this sweet soul?

Carvey fashioned the Church Lady as host and interviewer on a television talk show. Sitting down behind her desk, stained glass windows in the background, Church Lady front and center, her smile slightly a skewed, her hair affixed in a tight bun, razor sharp eyes peering out over her glasses ready to pounce on and eviscerate her next guest. Part Sunday School teacher, part henchman. Her favorites targets were tele-evangelists and politicians, as well as a smattering of media personalities, an occasional singer. No sooner had her guest appeared on stage, than the Church Lady laid into them, poking fun and sneering at them and commenting on their wardrobe or lack thereof. Quizzing them with venomous attacks about their personal behavior, their flippant comments, their lack of moral judgement, dismissing their objections with the flip of a hand, saying "How convenient."

The Church Lady would tear into their irresponsible actions in both word and deed... scolding them with scripture quotations and a raised eyebrow, ridiculing them for their embarrassing but well publicized private moments. Then, the Church Lady would lean back and fold her hands as if to pray, only to push the dagger in deeper and dismiss the whole sordid mess by saying "Now, isn't that special." Her comments were a blend of both pridefulness, and disdain, moral superiority and self-loathing all wrapped up with lots of self-righteousness. Generally, you didn't really like the Church Lady any better than her guests. But she was a hoot! And the Church Lady did (well) the church a great service underlining the importance of both sound theology and ethics. Theology, our beliefs and our convictions about God and ethics, the public values and moral choices and actions that should follow.

The writer of James was engaged in a similar task albeit with a far different methodology. His intention was to impart wisdom to Christians who found themselves challenged to think thoughtfully and act rightly. Never an easy task. Always a challenging endeavor. Becoming wise means learning how to think carefully and act virtuously in complex situations where one is tempted to think simplistically and act recklessly. In the opening chapters of his epistle, James is quick to provide an overview of what true wisdom looks like taking care of how we speak, giving care to those in distress and being careful about what we let into our lives. Being wise is learning to *integrate* our thoughts, will and actions to live faithfully. Integrate... which has to do with integrity.

In the scripture today, James begins by warning those who teach to be especially careful with their words and actions because they are in positions of greater influence. “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters...*” James warned!” So much for that big Sunday School teacher drive this year! Yet, James is quick to add. “*For all of us make many mistakes.*” I’ve made a ton of them. Haven’t you?

Martin Luther thought the letter of James “a right strawy epistle” because when James cautioned teachers (and I would add preachers) Luther thought James himself to be guilty of terrible harm ... because of James’s insistence that “*so faith, by itself, without works is dead.*” Luther thought James was underestimating the importance of grace and over-emphasizing the importance of works. But James knew that small things can amount to big things. Even the human tongue, small as it is, can erupt with words that ignite into a raging fire. “*With (the tongue) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.*” In the likeness of God. In this world of hateful rhetoric and vitriol, of sound bites and cyber bullying, of misinformation and disinformation, of reckless jargon and just plain old mean-spiritedness, we get the point. Words have tremendous consequences.

In his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, American legal scholar Stephen Carter describes how, when he speaks to various civic groups, he often addresses the topic “The Most Dangerous Children in America.” To introduce the theme, Carter tells two stories. The first is about a terrifying day, when his five-year-old daughter was caught in the crossfire of a gun battle between two rival gangs in Queens, New York. Adding to the terror was the fact that at the time Carter and his daughter were separated by the gunfire, and he could not get to her until the shooting stopped. A horrible day. The second story relates to another personal experience. On this day Carter was commuting by train from his home in the suburbs of Stamford, Connecticut to New Haven. As the train made its various stops, several teenagers got on board, headed for private schools along the route. At one stop a number of teenage girls got on the train and Carter happened to overhear their conversation, a heated debate about which community along the way was the most affluent and fashionable. One girl, named Westport as the most desirable town only to be countered by another who named Fairfield, her hometown, and so the argument raged back and forth until finally, one of the girls who happened to live in Westport thought she had the winning card and interjected the name of a world-famous entertainer who she claimed lived in Westport. “Not true,” said one of the Fairfield girls. The entertainer did not live in Westport but was only visiting a friend there. She knew this for a fact, she said, because she had met this entertainer herself at her father’s store. Hearing this, the Westport girl raised up and hooted disdainfully, “Your father owns a store? He works in a store?” The Fairfield girl realizing too late that she had said too much, cringed in shame. The Westport girl retorted, “What does he sell there?” she crowed “hardware.”

After telling these two stories, Carter asks his audience which of the two groups do they believe to be the most dangerous.... the teenage gang from Queens or the private

school girls. Predictably, most of Carter's audience say that the gang members are the more dangerous. But Carter points out that the gang members, violent as they are, are essentially closed in by their neighborhood, and most of them will, sadly but predictably likely be dead or in jail before long. The girls on the train, though, are another matter. These young people are attending the best schools in the land. They will no doubt be admitted to the finest universities and will go on to important careers where they will make decisions that will dramatically affect the lives of many people. In the long run the words they speak and the attitudes behind those words, may in fact, be more lethal than the gangs' bullets. Because that's what happens when human beings made in the likeness of God are devalued and demeaned? When they embody questionable values? When wisdom lacking and learning to think carefully and act virtuously in complex situations results in thinking simplistically and acting recklessly? We have seen too much of that, as of late.

In the unfolding story of Mark's gospel, chapter eight might be considered one of the high-water marks. Up to this point Jesus has been exercising his gifts as both a healer and teacher and his disciples have taken notice. Ever since his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus has been carefully clarifying and realizing his mission bit by bit and the depth and breadth of its implications. At this point in the journey, it seems a fitting moment to ask the question of his disciples, "What are folks saying? Are they getting the message. Who do YOU say that I am?"

You would think Peter's words would bring praise from Jesus. "You are the Messiah." These seem to be beautiful words. Wonderful words. But frankly, it was a scandalous thing to say. These were dangerous words. To say Jesus is the Messiah, meaning the Anointed One. meant that that Jesus would have to be a liberator intent on freeing the people of Israel from the tyranny of Roman oppression. That is what any Jewish believer would expect. Or to say that this Jesus is the Christ (the Greek word for the same title) to say of him that he was both a real human being and God incarnate, well the Greeks would find it incredulous to suggest that God could be encountered in both human flesh and perfect spirit.

Jesus is wise to hold those words in check, at least for now, at least until his mission is his more fully realized... more fully complete. Jesus orders Peter, "Tell no one." But he does not stop there. He goes on to tell Peter and the other disciples' that he would be rejected by those in authority and be killed and after three days rise again. But that is not all. He gathers the crowd together and says to them "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" Jesus says it quite openly. And it too is something scandalous. What kind of Savior walks like that? And talks like that?

You know, we often hear the words of Jesus "Come unto me." Come. I will bring you peace. Come. I will bring you rest. The invitation to come to Jesus is filled, at least for

me, with deep emotion and profound meaning. But the truth is Jesus said, "Follow me." Far more than he did "Come to me." Follow me. Love. Serve. Forgive. Follow me. Care for your neighbor. Offer compassion. Seek justice. Follow me. Walk in ways of peace and right-living. Follow me. Letting go of the false self, discovering the true self. And here's the thing. It's in following Jesus when we truly come to know the depths of God's insistent and relentless love.

Tom Long tells the story of a cold Saturday morning when he paid a visit to an old friend. It was the weekend before Christmas, and the neighborhood was covered with the usual display of festive lights and plastic ornaments and the trappings of the holiday season. His friend lay in an upstairs bedroom, cared for by loyal friends and tender folks from hospice who ushered him into his room and discreetly left them alone. There was not much to say. This would be his friend's last Christmas, and they both knew it. His friend could not move from his bed without help, and death, only a few weeks away from claiming him, seemed already an intruder in the room. They sat mostly silent, a word or two passing between them now and then, not an awkward silence but more a stillness of old friends' content to say their farewell with quietness. Suddenly there was movement downstairs. It was several members of the choir from his church that had come to sing Christmas carols. Outside the door you could hear them whispering about what song to sing. Indeed, what song do you sign to a dying man? Their voices started, softly at first, "*Lo how a rose 'e'er blooming...*" And a choir member gently opened the door. "*to show God's love aright.*"

His friend, deep in the darkness of dying and still in the agonizing hours away from dawn, turned away so that they would not see his tears as he listened to them as they sang, "*She bore to us a savior, when half spent was the night.*" These were words practiced and rehearsed in church for years. Hours and hours and hours of learning and saying those words. Not just any words but carefully chosen, fitting words, words of faith affirming that even in death nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. But the words by themselves would not have been enough without the effort of the choir members to get up out of bed on a cold December morning and drive across town to be physically present, so they might not only bring glad tidings but lament together and sing of a song of God's love coming "*When half -spent was the night.*"

In other words, they were walking the walk and talking the talk.

May it be so of us, as well. Amen.