

SERMON TITLE: "Wisdom's Cries and Folly's Lies"

TEXT: Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Well, we are still settling into fall routines, so I thought it might be good to set out a kind of roadmap for our worship themes between now and Advent.

Over the next three Sundays, we will be focusing on the Lectionary texts with the theme of wisdom—what it means to live wisely as followers of Jesus.

In October, we will be spending some time in the Book of Job, and looking at themes of suffering, lament, repentance, and the sovereignty of God in a world of evil (communion on Oct 28).

Then, in November, we will be looking at the theme of "hope" through a variety of Scriptural lenses. This is an appropriate way to lead into the season of Advent.

So, that's just a bit of a sense of where we are going over the next few months.

As many of you are no doubt aware, "freedom of speech" has been in the news this week.

A certain low-budget YouTube video called *Innocence of Muslims*, which portrayed the prophet Muhammad doing and saying some rather unflattering things, was translated into Arabic and released in parts of the Muslim world.

(For Muslims, it is blasphemous to portray the Prophet in *any* way, never mind in insulting and demeaning ways.)

This caused outrage in parts of the Arab world, and it led to the burning of the US Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, as well as rioting and protesting at other embassies around the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world.

The violence has re-ignited controversies around what counts as "hate speech." What should people be allowed to say and do? How far does our freedom to say and do what we want extend? Are we free to insult, degrade, and provoke others?

Of course, in the Western world we value freedom of speech quite highly. All kinds of disturbing, disgusting, ignorant and hateful things are said every day and our ability to do this is protected by law.

We may not *like* what people have to say, the saying goes, but we respect their right to say it.

But the events of the past week have once again brought attention to of just how far this goes.

And it is has shown just how incendiary the words that we use can be (both in the initial video, and in subsequent reactions to it).

This is true, on a less dramatic scale, in the world of everyday discourse—especially on the Internet.

The anonymity and immediacy of the online interaction has led to a virtually accountability-free space where people can (and do!) say whatever they want.

And often what people want to say, it seems, is quite hateful.

Just take a tour through the comments section of any newspaper article on a controversial issue (like the current violence in the Middle East, for example!).

Or recall the athletes at the recently concluded London Olympics who got sent home for posting racist and offensive comments on Twitter.

Or have a look at the rhetoric surrounding the United States presidential race.

Sometimes the nature and the tone of what passes for public discourse in the 21st century can be truly shocking.

But we don't need to turn to our televisions or computer screens for evidence of the tragedy of hateful words.

Often our own relationships—with our family, our spouse, our co-workers, etc—can be characterized by careless, sarcastic, and hurtful words.

We use words as weapons, even with those closest to us. Anger gets the better of us, and restraint goes out the window. We know the power of our words, and when we are hurting or angry, we let them fly.

It seems absurd, if you think about it. Words aren't physical things. We can't pick them up and look at them. Nothing about physical reality changes when we *say* certain things.

Yet, words can cause everything to change.

Whether it is in the arena of global politics or online discourse or our own personal lives, the words we use are profoundly powerful.

Our second reading this morning, from the book of James, is a well-known passage about the power of the words we use.

James doesn't sugar-coat things: "The tongue is a fire," he says. "It stains the whole body..." It "is itself set on fire by hell." "No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Images of fires burning around the Middle East this week provided powerful evidence of the truth of these words from James.

The book of James has often been looked at as a collection of moral essays or instructions.

James is known for his uncompromising demand for consistency between words and actions.

Many people don't like James very much—it seems like a lot of "law," and not much "grace."

(Martin Luther, it seems, favoured expunging the book of James from the New Testament canon for this very reason!)

Is James just a grouchy rulebook? How does it fit within the broader context of Scripture?

Many scholars have noted that the book of James shares similarities in style and content with Wisdom literature from the OT.

Wisdom literature—OT books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—focuses less on the specifics of Israel's history and covenant with God, than with more general concerns.

These books are often called "pragmatic religion"—they focus less on what to *believe* than on what to *do*. They are concerned with what is the best course to take in this life. What is most beneficial, most prudent... most *wise*.

Which brings us to our first reading, from the first chapter of Proverbs, which talks about wisdom "crying out" in the street to those who refuse her.

Wisdom is the path to blessing, folly to ruin.

Sounds good. But what, exactly, is wisdom?

This past week, one of my son's homework assignments was on synonyms and he had to match words that meant the same thing.

One of the pairs was "knowledge" = "wisdom."

Is that right? Is knowledge the same thing as wisdom?

We live in a time and a place where we are drowning in information. With the click of a mouse or a Google search we can instantly access a staggering amount of knowledge from around the world.

I have heard it said that a modern citizen encounters more information in a weekend edition of a major newspaper than a medieval peasant would have come across in their entire life.

That may be apocryphal, but I think the point remains. The human race has *never* had such easy access to so much information.

But are we wise? Does *knowing things* about the world = wisdom?

Well, the Greek philosophers had a lot to say about wisdom. Why not start there. Here is Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

[W]isdom must be the most precise and perfect form of knowledge. Consequently, a wise man must not only know what follows from fundamental principles, but he must also have true knowledge of the fundamental principles themselves. Accordingly, theoretical wisdom must comprise both intelligence and scientific knowledge. It is science in its consummation, as it were, the science of the things that are valued most highly.¹

According to Aristotle, wisdom is "perfect knowledge." It teaches us what to value.

What about a more contemporary voice? Neil Postman, in *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, strikes a similar tone in a conversation about information, knowledge, and wisdom:

[Wisdom is] the capacity to know what body of knowledge is relevant to the solution of significant problems.²

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald, 156.

² Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future* (New York: Alfred Knopf), 93-95.

So part of wisdom is *applying* knowledge to some end.

What end? Philosophers and other commentators down through the ages have often had some conception of human well being (*eudemonia*), whether this is understood as “happiness” or “flourishing.”

Philosophers would go to great lengths to articulate what this looked like, often lionizing such virtues as courage and strength in battle, justice and rationality.

But I think we get a different (and fuller!) sense of what the goal of human flourishing looks like in both Proverbs and James:

Proverbs:

- crying out for wisdom and understanding (2:3)
- pursuing righteousness and justice (2:9)
- prudence (2:11)
- the fear of the Lord! (9:10)

James 3:17:

- But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Biblical wisdom requires knowledge, certainly, but it seems to have at least as much to do with **character** and the **habits of the heart** that are expressed in every day life, *regardless* of how much we know.

So, maybe we could summarize it like this. Wisdom is knowing what to value and why, what the purpose of life is and why, and how to align our behaviour with these values and goals.

Perhaps most importantly, wisdom involves a proper understanding and appreciation of **who we are, who God is** (which brings us back to that fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom!), and **what God has made us to be and to do**.

What does this have to do with James and his bracing words about the words we use?

Quite simply, I think that in our text today, James is exhorting us to exercise wisdom in our speech. He is urging us to recognize the power of words, and to remember that the words we speak say something about who we are and what we are becoming.

Our Western notions of “freedom of speech” would have been quite foreign to James, but I suspect that if someone asked him about this, he would have simply said that **Yes,**

we have freedom of speech: we are free to use our speech to honour the goodness of God's image bearers.

So often, when we talk about freedom of speech and how we are to use our words, the conversation focuses on individual rights and boundaries. What are the limits of what we can say?

But what if we were to follow the words of James and reframe the question of how we use our words not as "what am I free to say or not to say?" but "***how can I freely exercise the gift of words to move closer and closer toward what I was created to be?***"

Not just, "can I speak freely about whatever *I* want?" but how can my words demonstrate that I am, with God's help, becoming more fully human?

From a Christian perspective, freedom is never just about the absence of constraints on our behaviour, but on the presence of a goal, a purpose to shape and guide our expression of freedom.

As James says, we are free to curse God's image bearers OR to honour the truth that they, like we, are loved by God and deserving of honour and care (James 3:9).

From a Christian perspective, we must always ask what is speech *for*?

Does our freedom exist to serve and gratify ourselves, our need to be right, to be loved, to be admired, to be feared... whatever?

Or is our freedom meant to be exercised for the good of others—even those who are different from us!—and for all of God's creation.

Throughout the book of Proverbs, the reader is presented with two choices, often symbolized by two women: Lady Wisdom and the "strange" woman who is a source of temptation.

This is not uncommon in the ancient world. In Greek mythology, danger on the path was often portrayed as female figures, such as the Sirens who would lure sailors to shipwreck with their beautiful voices (In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus ordered his sailors to tie him to the mast of the ship so he could hear their music without giving in to temptation).

In literature of the period, these female figures represented dangers and temptations to be resisted and avoided lest one fall into ruin.

It's interesting that in wisdom literature of Scripture, while temptation is sometimes represented as a woman, so is wisdom.

Temptation to become less than what we were created to be is portrayed as a loose woman who beckons and seduces from the street corners; but wisdom is also portrayed as a woman of beauty who shouts from the rooftops, calling us back to the intentions God had for us in creation.

One path leads to ruin, one to fulfillment and blessing – the choice is always ours to make, which road we will pursue, whether in the words we use, or in any other domain of life.

We have seen that wisdom is personified as a woman in Scripture. It also personified as Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:30, Jesus is described as the “the wisdom of God.”

It is interesting to note the context in which he Jesus is described as such – a passage where Paul talks about the “foolishness of the cross” and the “weakness” of the wisdom of God.

So often, when our tongues get us into trouble it is because we are seeking to defend ourselves or to exalt ourselves by demeaning others.

So often it is our failure to tell the truth or our refusal to expose falsehood that leads to the fires that James talks about.

So often, our words are about posturing, trying to make sure people know how smart and strong we are, and generally trying to make sure we get as much as we can for ourselves in the world. We use our words to convey strength and control and domination.

But this is not the pattern of Jesus, the Wisdom of God.

Jesus’ words throughout the NT match the passage from James quoted earlier: pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Jesus had harsh things to say, to be sure – almost always to “religious people” who spoke falsely about God. Indeed, his words got him in a lot of trouble with these kinds of people, and ultimately got him killed.

But his words were always in the service of truth, of justice, of righteousness.

His words were aligned with the path of true wisdom and human flourishing of the deepest and most lasting kind.

As in every area of life, Jesus is our pattern for a life well-lived.

So, may God help us to use our words well.

May God help us to be wise – always measuring our words and our actions according to the values and the goal of the kingdom of God.

May God help us to heed Wisdom's cry – to choose the right road, the road leading to blessing, to peace, and to becoming most fully human to the glory of God.

Amen.