“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” How many times have parents said that to children after their child came home from school or some event with tears in their eyes? Tears in their eyes after the child had heard something mean and hurtful said about them. Parents share those words with children with the hope that their words of encouragement can overcome whatever hurt their child feels.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we know that some words really do hurt and have a lasting effect. Someone once told me about singing in her middle school chorus. She enjoyed singing. She enjoyed being with her friends in chorus. After one practice, this little middle school girl was asked by the teacher to see her after class. She thought that maybe the teacher was going to compliment her on how well she was doing in the class or ask her to sing a solo or something. Instead, this middle school music teacher told this young girl that during their upcoming performance, she would stand at the back and that it was best if she just mouthed the words. This young girl who grew up to become a Presbyterian minister and leads worship services never sings out loud now. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. In this little girl’s case, discouraging words had a lasting effect.

Every one of us has a story when the words of another cut us deeply. Maybe you turned in a test and did really well on it and the teacher asked you if you copied from someone else because she did not trust that you could do this good of work. Maybe it was a parent who told you over and over that you would never amount to anything. Maybe it was a classmate who made fun of the clothes you wore to school that day or the bad test grade that you received.

Maybe it was the nasty email or text you received from someone at work about some project that you were putting your heart and soul into. Maybe someone posted something nasty about you on Facebook. Maybe a friend told you about what someone else said about you. Every one of us has at least one story where the words of another cut us deeply.

And then we hear the very sad story of the teenager who gets picked on at school for being different in some way and then he goes out and sticks a gun to his head to end all of the pain. Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Yea, right. We know that the words from another can and do hurt quite a lot.

The writer in the Bible named James must have known something about how deadly words can be. James is the brother of Jesus and he writes this letter to several church communities. One of the issues he addresses in this letter is the issue of what they are saying about one another. It seems that these Christian communities were saying mean and hurtful things about one another.

Surely none of us can relate to this. We all know that Christians today would never say anything hurtful about another (sarcastic). We all treat one another really well and always speak kind words of another.

But James tells his audience to be careful of what their tongue can do. Even though it is such a small part of the body, it can wreak great havoc. James compares the words we say to be like a spark in a dry forest. Even a small spark can create a massive forest fire. The smallest negative comment can have a great impact upon someone.

James says that the foundation for these cruel words about another come from hell itself. Now hell in the New Testament is the Greek word “Gihenna.” Gihenna is Israel was a literal place on earth. I got to see “hell” or “Gihenna” when I went to Israel a few years ago. Hell was the place where the trash was dumped and the methane gas from this huge trash dump would be continually on fire. Hence comes the image of eternal hell being a place of continual fire. So the source of cruel and damaging words is the discarded trash of another.

Why do we say cruel things of one another? When we say hurtful things, or tweet hurtful things, or post hurtful things on Facebook about a friend or even a famous person, those words originate from hell. Those words originate from the garbage of this world.

But James also recognizes that not only can a small comment make a huge negative impact, but a small positive comment can make a huge positive impact as well.

I was an ok player as a child playing basketball. But I remember one game in particular. I played on the blue team at Woodland Park. We were playing the red team for the championship. We were real original in our team names in those days. Our team won and we were led by our two best players. But I remember scoring 4 points in the game. 4 points. 2 baskets.

But when I ran into the coach of the other team at the grocery store a few days later, he made a big deal in front of my parents about how his team lost because of my stellar play. I scored 4 points. Not a big deal. But he made it a big deal in my eyes and in front of my parents. My parents don’t remember that conversation. But some almost 40 years later I still remember that affirmation and the way that coach made me feel very special.

My guess is that even if you have suffered some pain through the comments of some, you have also experienced great joy through the words of some. That elementary school teacher who gave you that special compliment, that high school youth advisor who affirmed something that you did, that spouse who shared supportive words during a difficult moment in life.

The words we share with others say more about us than they say about the other. (repeat)

So what do your words about another say about you? Do you look for ways to say supportive and encouraging things about others or do you look for ways to be critical of others? Do you post things on Facebook that are uplifting and inspiring or do you post things on Facebook that degrade others?

Do you say positive things about your classmates or do you tear them down by your words? Do you tell your spouse about the things they do well or do you tell your spouse about the things they mess up?

The tongue can set a forest on fire. The tongue or our keypad can also help inspire someone to greatness. How are you using your words? Are your words building others up or are your words tearing others down?

In a little while we will hear some very important words. Words about how “This is my body which is broken for you.”

What do those words mean to us?

Are these words meant to build us up or tear us down? AMEN.

-Text: James 3

-Given: September 16, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)