

We have been reading through the New Testament letter of James over the past few weeks and now we move into the third chapter. Tradition tells us that James was the brother of Jesus and a leader in the early church. James wrote these words to Jewish Christians living outside of Jerusalem who were facing persecution for their faith.

### **Read James 3**

When I read these words from James about the dangers of the words that come from our mouths, I can't help but think about the place where harsh words seem to affect us the most. And that is as a child or youth. Who among us doesn't have a story of words that were said to you that were crushing in some way?

Words which were meant to cause you harm. We say the phrase, "sticks and stones may break our bones but words will never hurt us" but we know that phrase is a lie. We know that the words of another can hurt and damage us in ways that can last a lifetime.

I share the words of one teenage girl:

Joanna tells her story this way. "My friends and I parted ways and headed off to our classes. As I walked into my classroom my eyes fell upon one particular person, Aaron. I attempted to hide my blush as I walked to my desk, which was difficult because I sit in front of him so I blushed even more.

I turned around as I started to sit so that I could talk to him as if my mouth would let me. 'Hi, Aaron, I stuttered.' Everything went slo-mo as he turned. His gorgeous brown hair moving with his motions. His beautiful green eyes looking at me and his perfect smile. Aaron was perfect.

Aaron began looking at me, getting ready to say something. Just say it Aaron, I thought eagerly. Just say the words, "I love you Joanna" and we would live happily ever after. But that is not the words he shared. Instead, I heard the crushing words, "Joanna, you're fat." My heart shattered into a million pieces.

I've never wanted to run away as fast as right then but the teacher walked in. I turned around but all I could hear was the laughter of my classmates. I was hurt that my crush, the person I hoped would never say anything bad about me, just pointed out my biggest insecurity.

Words can be more harmful than sticks and stones. The words we say can cause great anguish in another and the words said to us can cause us tremendous hurt.

When describing the importance of controlling what we say, James uses three metaphors. James says that controlling our speech is like a bit in the mouth of a horse. The rider of a horse can control the direction of the horse by controlling the bit placed over the horse's tongue. Likewise, James says that what comes from our mouth guides the direction of our life.

James says controlling our speech is like the rudder of a ship. Outside forces like wind and waves batter a ship back and forth but the rudder keeps it going in the proper direction. James says that in the midst of difficult and challenging situations our words can guide us forward or set us back.

The third metaphor that James sites in describing the tongue is how the words we say can ignite a flame. This flame can lead to something positive or this flame can bring down a forest.

James seems overly focused on the negative consequences of the words we say. His words lead me to think that he had recently experienced some harsh words come his way. The emphasis he puts on the dangers of language makes me wonder if he was in a similar situation to the teenage girl who was told by her crush that she was fat. Maybe James knew what it was like to have harsh words said to him.

As we begin to enter into the presidential campaign season we hear lots and lots of pretty harsh words said between competing politicians. After the latest shooting in Oregon we once again read the manifesto of an angry young man with very harsh words to say about other groups of people.

We hear a lot in our culture about the importance of free speech. But how often do we hear people complain about having their free speech limited who then speak kind words about others? Usually the ones who shout about the importance of free speech are also the ones sharing harsh words about some other group that they despise.

And the church is not immune to sharing harsh and degrading speech. I know as well as anyone that church people can say the harshest and cruel things to your face and behind your back. These gossipy words leave many outside of the church feeling as though active church going Christians are really just a bunch of hypocrites.

But if we are faithful to our God and to our religion then we in the church can offer a different set of words than the harmful and hurtful words that are often shared in our culture. We in the church can offer words that bring healing and reconciliation. I want to share a story of someone whose life was changed by words that she found recently in an unusual church setting.

I enjoy and am inspired by the reflections of Cathleen Falsani. You will find her words in my email signature. Falsani has a unique perspective on faith and religion. But I was surprised to read this week about her experience of covering the pope as a reporter and her experience at mass in Madison Square Garden. She writes:

“Brace yourself, Father,” Falsani said, taking a seat in a plastic chair facing my would-be confessor in Madison Square Garden’s dimly lit Madison Bar on Friday, a few hours before the start of the papal mass.

The bearded Franciscan priest in his dove gray vestments laughed and said, “No way. It’s all fine. Think of it as a big embrace of forgiveness from your heavenly father.” “OK. I tried to warn you,” replies Falsani.

“Let me see if I remember how this goes,” She began. “Bless me father for I have sinned; it’s been 35 years since my last confession.” He tried not to look startled and almost pulled it off.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” he said, smiling kindly as he reached beneath his cassock to pull out a small paperback tract that, he explained, contained a list of questions that he could ask me that might make recounting all of my trespasses since the third grade a little less daunting.

“Did I believe in God? Yes. Had there ever been a time in the last 35 years when I didn’t? No. Have I ever practiced witchcraft or voodoo, participated in a séance, fortune telling, had my palm read, or done yoga?” “Yoga!” she replied.

He kind of shrugged. “Did I still believe in the power of the sacraments?” “Yes.” “But you just don’t practice all of them,” the priest said, with a knowing wink. I explained that my family left the Catholic Church when I was 10 years old — not long after I made my First Communion — and that I’d been Protestant or Anglican ever since. He didn’t ask me why I decided to participate in the sacrament of reconciliation today in a bar inside the home of the Knicks.

I appreciated that as I was unsure how to answer his question. I don’t know why, exactly, but I just did. He didn’t ask me whether I wanted to “return” to the church. He simply asked me about my life, listened, and extended God’s forgiveness.

About a half hour before I decided to confess my sins to a complete stranger in a very public place (there were no portable confessionals, just two chairs and a priest), I had been riding in a packed elevator from the 10th floor of the Garden where the media covering the papal mass had been sequestered, down to a lower floor to grab something to eat.

When the doors opened on the sixth floor, another woman on the lift said, “Sixth floor: Concessions and Confessions.” I laughed, but as I waited to pay for my cheeseburger with fig jam, I started thinking about confession. I’ve probably spent more time in Catholic churches in the last 20 years as a religion journalist than I ever did when I was actually a practicing Catholic. In recent years, particularly when I am in Rome and especially since Pope Francis became pontiff in 2013, I’ve felt a pull toward the confessional.

As a journalist, I’ve watched people go into the confessional and come out a few minutes later looking, somehow, refreshed. Relieved. I don’t believe that I need an intermediary to ask God’s forgiveness, but there’s something powerful about naming aloud my sins to another person, about owning my gnarliest mistakes and worst missteps and telling someone I yearned for forgiveness.

“Friday was my birthday,” Falsani revealed. I suppose part of me wanted a fresh start. A new beginning. And I wanted to see if that extra spring in people’s steps I’ve observed on occasion when they leave the confessional was an actual thing.

Falsani pauses and reflects, “Forgiveness is real.”

The kind Franciscan was patient and good-natured. He listened. He didn’t judge. He encouraged me to think about the forgiveness and not simply how I can receive it, but how I can extend it to others. He asked me whether there was anyone I thought I should forgive. A lump appeared in my throat. Yes. There is.

“Who,” he asked. I told him. I felt tears welling up in my eyes. “Would you like to forgive her now?” he asked. “Yes,” Falsani replied. He asked me to say out loud that I forgave the person by name for what she has done to me, that saying it would be like taking the knife out of a wound so it could heal — so God could heal it.

I did. A confession of a different kind. I forgave her.

Falsani said the priest offered absolution, and for my penance he asked her to meditate on the story of Jesus’ baptism, when a dove appeared and the crowd who’d watched John the Baptist dunk Jesus in the river heard God’s voice say, “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”

He asked me whether I knew why God said that out loud so people could hear it. I admitted I didn’t. “Jesus presumably already knew that. So why did God say it so others could hear it, write it down, and include it in the Bible?” he said.

“I’m not sure,” Falsani said. “For you,” he said. God feels that way about all of God’s children, the priest said. As she got up to leave, she thanked him for taking the time and for his kindness.

“Maybe don’t wait another 35 years to do this again?” he said, grinning. “Don’t you feel great? Like you’ve just gotten a huge hug from God?” I did feel great. Lighter, somehow. Unburdened.

There are lots of unkind words which we hear. But I invite us today to hear these words.

You are a child of God. And no matter what we you have done, you are forgiven by God through Jesus Christ. AMEN.

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- Falsani, Cathleen, <https://sojo.net/articles/bless-me-father-i-have-sinned#sthash.EmOI9tp6.dpuf>

-Crenshaw, Stormy, <http://www.quotev.com/story/3218350/Hurtful-Words/>

## **World Communion Prayer of Confession**

Lord, on this World Communion Sunday, we confess our sins to you. We are truly sorry for our wrongdoings and shortcomings, for sins of commission and sins of omission. Forgive us, we pray, in Christ's name.

We confess to you that we have not shared the resources we have with those who have less. We have been slow to weep with those who weep and to laugh with those who laugh. We have nurtured a society that turns quickly to violence when we feel threatened. We have called others harmful names rather than brother or sister. Help us to be good stewards over the earth you have placed in our care; help us to unite in love and concern for one another, not just in our local community, but with brothers and sisters in all the world.

As we draw near to your holy table we thank you, Lord, for providing the Bread of Life for us. As we partake, impart on us your grace and mercy, unite us with Christ, our Lord, and with one another. May your kingdom be established in all the earth. Amen.

## **Prayers of the People**

O God, we give thanks that you have prepared this rich feast for us on this World Communion Sunday— a feast of grace for all the nations and peoples of the world, a sign of the day when you will swallow up sin and death forever.

Remembering your grace to us, O God, we offer ourselves to you with gratitude as we share this joyful feast. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon this bread and cup; make us one in the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. By your Spirit, whet our appetites for that glorious day when your children will hunger and thirst no more and you will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

On this day we lift up those who are suffering from the ravages of a storm and the violence of a weapon. We are getting all too used to acts of violence in this country. Work through each of us to create a more just society that lifts up the value of every person. Use us to be models of reconciliation.