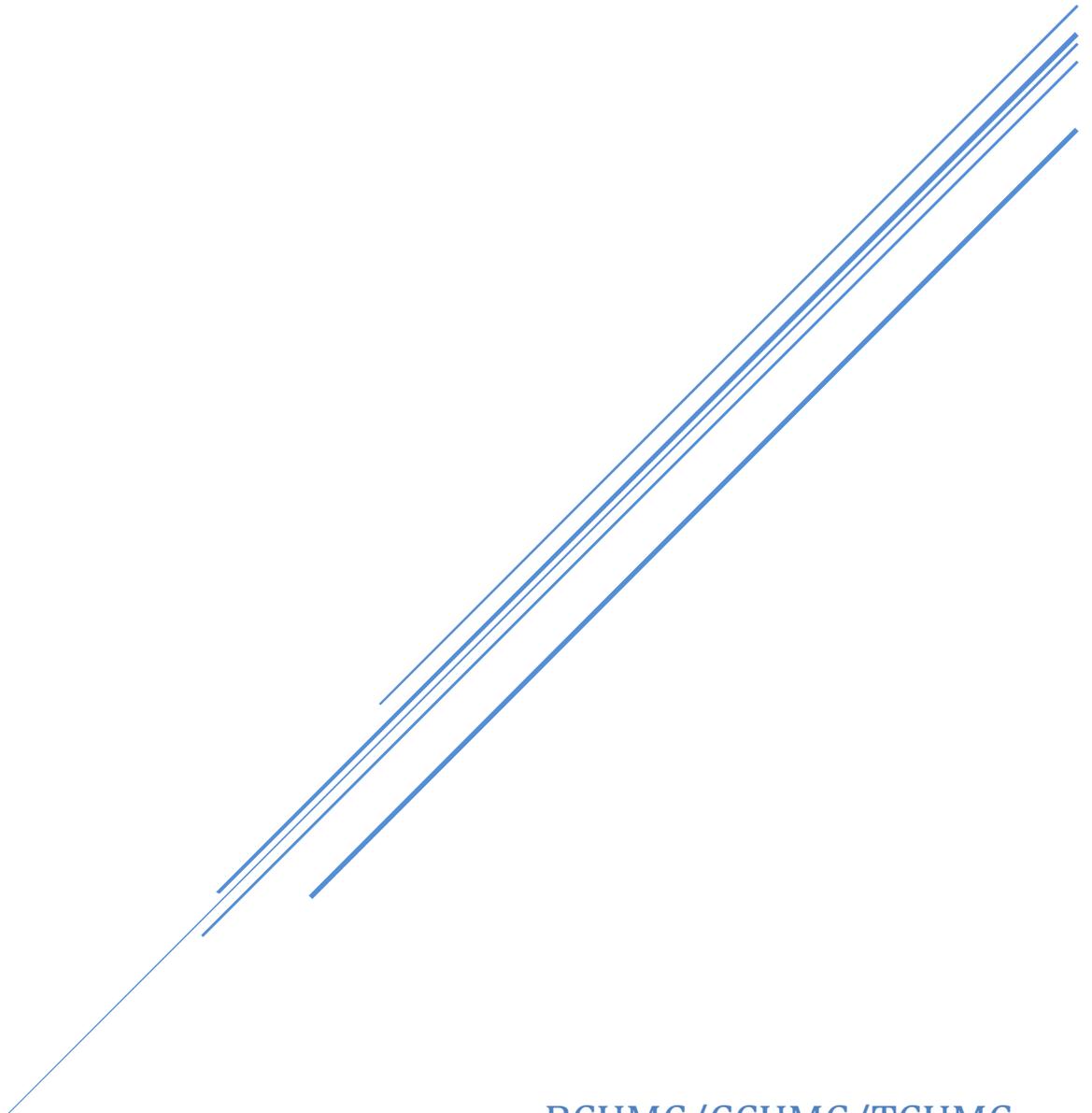


STICKS & STONES BLAH BLAH BLAH

James 3:1-12



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Sticks and stones may break my bones but words... blah, blah, blah -- you know the rest, and it isn't true anyway. I think we're all too aware that words can cut deeper and leave longer lasting scars than any stick or stone. I saw one poignant image that begged, "Please, just throw rocks!"

In the fall of 2013, in Folsom CA, middle schooler Ronin Shimizu did a very brave thing: He signed up to be the only boy on the school's cheerleading team.

According to sources, 12-year-old Ronin loved being on the squad. His classmates at Folsom Middle School, however, didn't approve and teased him mercilessly for it, calling him "gay" and other cruel names.

The bullying got so bad that eventually Ronin left Folsom Middle School to be home schooled. Then on December 3 of last year, his parents found their little boy dead, the victim of an apparent suicide.

Can you imagine? Day after day, enduring the same taunts by the same people, knowing that the faculty – the grownups! – will do nothing, after all, boys will be boys. Except that girls are just as bad...

October 2013, two girls, 12 and 14 years old, were arrested in the death of a 12-year-old central Florida girl. Officials said Rebecca Sedwick was "terrorized" by as many as 15 girls who ganged up on her for months using online message boards and texts. The month before, authorities say, Rebecca climbed a tower at an abandoned concrete plant and jumped.

Imagine a daily barrage of verbal assaults everywhere you go. It's not long before you're conditioned to hate the very essence of everything that you know to be true about your authentic self - everything that makes you you.

I know this to be true. I was a victim of bullying in elementary school and it continued through middle school and well into high school. I became the invisible boy – or so I hoped. "Ignore them," my parents often told me. "Don't let them see it bother you." So I never raised my hand in class, never made eye contact in the hall,

and I dreaded having to go to school every day. I literally censored everything I did, or said, or felt.

The author of today's passage in James says that speech is innocent enough. After all, the tongue is such a small part of the body, right? But it's not the size of the boat that matters though, is it? James tells us that the tongue is like the bit that controls an entire horse. Or it's like the rudder of a ship. He then goes on to talk about how the tongue is a tiny flame that sets the whole forest on fire, burning thousands of acres, incinerating everything in its path.

James must really be serious! He doesn't quit piling metaphor on top of metaphor, so that we have a clear picture of what he's taking about.

The first one – the bit in the horse's mouth – is probably the simplest. It's pretty straightforward. The rider, or back then the chariot driver, can direct the speed and direction of a giant horse – horses have always kind of scared me, they're too big! Anyway, the rider guides this humongous beast by means of a little piece of metal in the horse's mouth. (Interesting that the bit works by pressing against the horse's tongue.) So the image is that whoever controls the horse's tongue controls the entire horse.

Now, with the second metaphor – the ship's rudder – we find we can add a few more aspects to the imagery. The captain, the rudder and the ship are similar to the rider, bit, and horse. But now the imaginative reader can envision the influence of outside forces. We can picture the wind and the waves taking the ship on a different course or even destroying it. A captain who can keep control of the rudder stands a better chance of weathering difficult circumstances, staying the course, and emerging intact.

The third metaphor, though, is quite a bit different than the bit and the rudder. They are just tools, but here, there's a sense that the tongue is more than just a tool, but something outside that works independently from the operator. Like the bit and the rudder, the flame is still a little thing with big results; but it's out of control and uncontrollable. What this little flame can set in motion has no purpose but destruction. And the author goes on to describe the disruptive nature of fire and how it upsets the entire cycle of nature or in the literal Greek, "wheel of birth."

“...every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,” writes James, “but no one can tame the tongue. It’s a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

But it’s not all bad. What we say reveals more about us than it does the recipient. We name the world and each other with our words. Words have great power.

Think of the implication of the phrase, “Speak of the devil....” In the Harry Potter films nobody will say the name of the dark wizard, referring to him only as “you-know-who,” or “He who must not be named.” Our words have tremendous power. They can exclude or embrace, heal or humiliate, lift up or tear down.

There is an excellent book called, *CRISIS: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*. It sounds a bit melodramatic, but the book is a call for Americans to wake up to the pain that’s inflicted on gay children and teens by a society that has been led to believe that it’s OK, or that it’s somehow morally or religiously justified.

Forty intensely personal, autobiographical stories from people with almost nothing in common – white evangelicals, black Baptists, famous politicians, even two professional athletes – but growing up, all were witnesses to the power of speech. In this case, the power of speech to demean and defeat – to inflict lasting damage on a fellow child of God.

Week after week, a 10-year old hears how he’s an ‘abomination to God’ for something over which he has no control, or that he’s going to burn in hell, or deserves to be stoned to death.

But it’s not just gay people who bear witness to the toxicity of the tongue. Our words have the power to protect, to affirm, and to celebrate the dignity and worth of every human being – every child of God – or we can reduce people to labels.

In the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision of 1857, the court voted 7-2 that blacks were not full human beings. They were private property that belonged to whites. They could be bought and sold, and any human rights in the constitution did not apply to them.

In 1938, British writer Dorothy Sayers wrote two challenging essays asking this question: are women human? It's easy enough to adjust her categories. Are Muslims human? What about undocumented immigrants? Or the homeless? Do we speak of them as if they really are created in the very image of God? Or do we try to define them in ways that will keep us in our place of superiority? The gist of Sayers' argument is simple enough: women should be acknowledged as human beings – no more and no less.

That's how Jesus treated every person he met, not just women. Sayers writes that the women who financed the life and ministry of Jesus,

"...had never known a man like Jesus – there never has been such another. A prophet who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The Women, God help us!' or 'The Ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never...urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; had no ax to grind and no ... male dignity to defend. He took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about women's nature."

Or anyone else, either.

Proverbs 12:18 puts it in simple terms: "Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

Ultimately, today's text in James – much like last week's message from Mark -- calls us to a close examination of ourselves, concentrating on the words that come out of our mouths, to help determine who we really are. In AA, step ten requires the alcoholic to "... continue to take personal inventory and continue to set right any new mistakes as we go along."

Try this: Assume I'm gay. I just read about a pastor who said those exact words to his congregation. He said, "When you're speaking to me, or around me, speak as if I'm

gay. Speak as if I'm an immigrant. Speak as if I'm Hispanic or Muslim or whatever it is that scares you – or that you're against – so that you can practice a compassionate and respectful approach.”

James' finishes up with a couple of final metaphors, “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree ... yield olives, or a grapevine figs?”

We will find ourselves to be either one or the other. Just maybe we can control our unruly tongues after all, but we will have to constantly ask ourselves: who are we, and what has God made us to be?

I'd like to close with a poem I found by Zeba Khan, a contributor for Muslimmatters.org, an autism parent, and the Founder and Director of AutismUAE.

I found the poem almost by accident in a collection of moving photographs called, “Weapon of Choice Project.” I urge you to check it out at www.hurtwords.com, or you can do a Google search for ‘Weapon of Choice Project.’ It's called,

Sticks and stones may break my bones.

*Bones will heal and bruises fade
But time can't heal the hurt words made.
There are no stitches for stupid bitches,
Lazy brats, you big retard
No person's hand could hit as hard.
A kid can fall and hurt his knee
But never feel less human
A kid can call another names
Escaping prosecution.
A man can break his child's soul
But leave his bones intact
A girl can hit another's heart
And kill it on impact.
Stick and stones may break my bones
But words may break my soul*

*And they've yet to sell a bandaid
That can make my self-worth whole.*

Amen.