



*Tongues of Fire*

*(3rd in the sermon series on James)*

*James 3:1-12*

Sunday, September 16th, 2018

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel

Text: “And the tongue is a fire...” (v 6)

I was privileged to officiate at a wedding last night. The party favor for the guests at the reception was the fixings for s'mores with the largest marshmallow that I have ever seen! This is the perfect time of year for evening fires, roasting marshmallows and having fellowship in the cool night air. Those of us of a certain age may remember church camp fires when someone would pull out a guitar and we'd sing. “It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing”.

Fire. It can create memories, and it can just as easily destroy.

One of my warm memories is of a visit that I had with an elderly woman named Olive Stewart. Olive lived on a very rustic farm near Princeville. Driving down the long narrow lane and coming upon the tiny house that had been built a half century ago, a house that, at one time, she shared with her brother Carl. Getting out of the car you had to dodge banty chickens that swarmed around your legs. Walking through the low wooden gate you saw a neat little yard and a porch surrounded by spring and summer flowers.

My father lived with the Stewarts the summer after his mother died unexpectedly. He was 15 years old and his whole world had fallen apart. He used to tell stories of helping Carl in the field, pitching square bales on the back of a hay wagon.

I remember one visit with Olive very specifically. It was before I was married. I spent the morning doing some odd jobs around her place when she insisted that I enjoy a hot lunch. I watched her prepare a very simply meal in an old stove that she fueled with corn cobs. The glow of the fire in the stove fed the fellowship and physical nourishment that I shared with Olive that day. It's funny, but I hadn't thought of that in over 40 years.

It's kind of like the fire of Pentecost; the Holy Spirit descending upon the gathered disciples empowering them to spread the word of God's saving love and grace witnessed to in the life, death and, most importantly, resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Yet, fire can also destroy, can't it. As of the end of July over 13,000 firefighters battled 12 large wildfires in California. These fires burned over 688,000 acres or 1000 square miles, destroying homes and other structures.

When we started this series on the Letter of James I said that it is Christianity 101. It tells us how we live out our baptism and live together in community as a witness to the One Whom we call Lord.

How we speak to our about one another is a barometer of our health as a community of faith.

Do we build up or tear down?

Do we gossip or speak truth in love?

Do we seek reconciliation or sow the seeds of division?

Our words, as well as our actions are the true witness to the world outside of the faith community.

Gandhi is reported to have said that he was a great admirer of Jesus and that he would readily become a Christian if he ever met one!

Adam Hamilton, the senior minister of the Resurrection United Methodist Church in Kansas City, once told the story of riding the car of one of his best friends. The friend had decided to place a church bumper sticker on his car that read, "I follow Jesus".

Well, as fate would have it, as they rode along someone pulled in front of Hamilton and his friend just before a stop light. The friend hit the break, honked and probably muttered a few things perhaps adding a hand gesture. Sometime things escalate. When the light turned green Hamilton's friend zipped around the offender, pulled in front of him and slowed way down. The driver, now behind them, honked his horn. At the next stop light both drivers jumped out of their cars. It was at this time that Adam Hamilton heard the driver behind him shout, "Is that what following Jesus looks like?!"

He goes on to say, "Don't put something on your bumper you're not willing to try to live".

The lesson, though, is also true of social media. "It's so easy to express our feelings using social media without the filters we would use if we were speaking to someone face to face. We post snarky comments about another, or to another.

We hurl 280-character zingers at one another. The Tweet limit used to be 140 characters but it seems that we now have so much more to say!

And we often pass on gossip, innuendo and outright lies about other people as we forward things we assume are true, without finding out if they really are. The Bible calls this, literally, gossip and backbiting.

I remember being with a youth group once when a member of the group said something nasty about someone else. One of his peers asked, "Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?"

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing, James writes, my brothers and sisters, this ought not be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? (v. 10)

There's a story that I am sure is apocryphal but true in the truest sense of the word. A grandfather is speaking to his grandchild. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.

"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf will win?”

The grandfather replied, “The one you feed.”

“It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing; that’s how it is with God’s love, once you’ve experienced it: you spread God’s love to everyone, you want to pass it on.”

Each week in this sermon series I have given you a homework assignment. This week’s assignment is to think before you speak, tweet, post, or forward. Ask yourself if it builds or destroys, sews together or rends apart. Ask if it is God glorifying or denigrating to someone created in the very image of God. Amen.