

This ought not to be so (James 3:1-12)

Being a blessing and being a curse

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September 10, 2021

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Bill Cosby had a bit where he noted that sometimes we start saying something, and then about halfway through we realize how foolish we are being and our brain starts saying, “Dumb, dumb, dumb.” The example he used was when he visited the blind pianist Ray Charles and told him that he ought to turn the lights on in his place or he might hurt himself. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

I hesitate to talk about Cosby, but his own life illustrates what James seems to be getting at when he says, “This ought not to be so.” Someone who was as inspirational and influential as Bill Cosby should not also be such a horrendous abuser. I grew up with the *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* cartoon on Saturday mornings, and seeing Fat Albert as one of the heroes was important to me as an overweight kid. Now that I know the evil Cosby did, I cannot watch the show anymore. This pattern repeats itself over and over: the same people who can bless become curses.

As James notes, we can control powerful horses and mighty ships, but we can’t even control a small amount of flesh in our own heads. “Dumb, dumb, dumb” is mild enough, but other words hurt deeply—as do words that remain unsaid.

These elegiac verses bring me back to the garden and Adam’s first call from God—to name the animals. It ought to be this way: to name and shepherd God’s creation. But it is not so. The images James offers of fresh water from salt or olives from a fig tree—he is trying to express just how wrong this state of things is. Wrong, wrong,

wrong.

He uses the image of fire, and I think many of us know exactly what he means. We remember times when we wish we had said something different, said it differently, or just kept quiet. We recall the anger that flared up or the relationship that we poisoned (to use another of his images). Sometimes we carry conversations with us for weeks or months, and we replay them over and over again.

The verses included in the lectionary passage do not offer much hope. James is in deep anguish over how the things we say can be so destructive. The next verses after this passage, however, do speak about a good life and deeds done in the humility that comes from the wisdom of heaven. Fire has the capacity to destroy—or to give light, warmth, and life when used wisely.

What about James's own words to us? Are they destructive or life-giving? Do his insights bring us only regret-filled memories and anxiety about what will happen the next time? Or are they more like the horse's bridle and the ship's rudder, helping us to direct the raw power we possess?

He seems to curse humanity by naming how readily we cause harm. But while a salt spring cannot produce fresh water, his curse can produce a blessing. The epistle of James is filled with hard sayings, harsh assessments, and prophetic condemnations. If we can listen to him, we can also catch glimpses of what he sees through his agony: good fruit and a harvest of righteousness (3:17). These are not impossible for us, but they are not easy to achieve either. Humility, caution, and circumspection—these are what James can produce in us. And if we can carry wisely the burden of knowing just how harmful we can be, we are likely to find that we can do less cursing and more blessing.