



“In the face of the strongest wind”

James 3:1-12 -The Message translation

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC

September 12, 2021

Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks

Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards. And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.

A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!

It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very people made in the image of The Holy.. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it? Apple trees don't bear strawberries, do they? Raspberry bushes don't bear apples, do they? You're not going to dip into a polluted mud hole and get a cup of clear, cool water, are you?

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PHEW-we better pray:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our God and our Redeemer. Amen.

In 2017 A book called iGen: *Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood-- and what that means*

for the rest of us. was published and read widely by many colleagues whose call on their life is accompanying young people through their adolescence and beyond. The book is based on research done by Jean M. Twenge. The focus of the research is on Generation Z- children, teens and young adults born in the mid 1990's and later. The findings of her research confirmed some of my lived experiences in youth ministry and in parenting our children now 17 and 20 years of age. The research is informative and inconclusive....

Twenge states:

“In the three years I spent working on this book, making dozens of line graphs, reading campus newspapers, and listening to the stories and opinions of young people during in-depth interviews, I’ve realized this: iGen’ers are scared, maybe even terrified. Growing up slowly, raised to value safety, and frightened by the implications of income inequality, they have come to adolescence in a time when their primary social activity is staring at a small rectangular screen that can like them or reject them. The devices they hold in their hands have both extended their childhoods and isolated them from true human interaction. As a result, they are both the physically safest generation and the most mentally fragile. They are more focused on work and more realistic than Millennials, grasping the certainty that they’ll need to fight hard to make it. They’re exquisitely tolerant and have brought a new awareness of equality, mental health, and LGBT rights, leaving behind traditional structures such as religion. iGen’ers have a solid basis for success, with their practical nature and their inherent caution. If they can shake themselves free of the constant clutch of their phones and shrug off the heavy cloak of their fear, they can still fly. And the rest of us will be there, cheering them on.”

It seems fitting that we take a moment in light of our amazing young people, the scripture we find ourselves in today and the 20th year post 9/11 to pause and recognize the reality this generation has been living into.....

- Yesterday marked 20 years of planes being used as an actual weapon. Rhetoric and war increased intense profiling of Muslim and Sikh siblings.
- Since 2002 there has been a shooting at a school every month in the US. These are not all mass shootings like Columbine and Parkland but the reality of gun violence at school is strong. Our children have been through active shooter drills not always knowing if indeed it is a drill.
- Mass incarceration in this country continues to rise. In my lifetime the prison population has risen by 500%. The crime rate however, has remained fairly steady while the laws and sentencing have continued to disproportionately take the lives of Brown and Black siblings at a much higher rate.
- Bullying has taken on insidious forms. No longer do we imagine the bully as an Eddie Haskell character who makes some poor decisions while manipulating others to get more attention. Shaming and downright hate modeled in public by the highest leader in the land has justified in-person and online behavior that is intimidating, fear producing and violent.

- Bipoc Violence that has been in the fabric of our history has been documented and seen for what it is- the worst part of us- the truth that can no longer be unseen thanks to the wide use of surveillance and multiple forms of technology.
- Cancel Culture-The phrase [“cancel culture” is said to have originated](#) from a relatively obscure slang term – “cancel,” referring to [breaking up with someone](#) – used in a 1980s song. This term was then referenced in film and television and later evolved and gained traction on social media. Over the past several years, cancel culture has become a deeply contested idea in the nation’s [political discourse](#). There are plenty of debates over what it is and what it means, including whether it’s a way to hold people accountable, or a tactic to punish others unjustly, or a mix of both. And some argue that cancel culture [doesn’t even exist](#).
- The Fight for Critical Race Theory aka the fight for truth-telling. The most hyper educated nation has been peddling a lie about itself. The history that has been taught in our schools is at best revisionist. White Supremacy Culture has elevated our American Idyllic Ego to heights where lies are preferred to the truth. Where the history we are teaching our children does not lend a critical evaluation of our past and instead white washes it-leaving out vital information that we desperately need to know, need to teach in order to disrupt the cycles of oppression and lies.
- COVID19- a worldwide pandemic that has killed over 656,318 in this country alone. For reference-yesterday we honored and remembered the 2,977 that died. Names were read aloud, identifying their personhood and the families that have had to navigate a world without them for the past 20 years.
- Protecting one another and ourselves from a deadly disease requires legislation-every call to personal and collective responsibility continues to be met with anger and supremacist rhetoric that has put the least of these continually in harm's way.
- Global Warming is causing extinction of life and land, while warming waters literally blow through leaving death and destruction in its wake. The sources for water and food deteriorate with the environment. The wealth in this country has enabled many to ignore and erase the climate crisis because our comfort remains intact.
- Wildfire season has expanded. It levels wildlife and communities. The smoke from these fires can be seen from space. This same smoke has swept from the west and made it into our air here thousands of miles away.

Friends, I know cognitively you know all of this but for a moment I want you to think back to your 14 year old self. Remember what it meant to get up, get yourself together and show up in spaces where you felt vulnerable and were simultaneously finding yourself and your way with far less global chaos pulling at you.

And still our youth find themselves here, sharing space at Grace Covenant with you and with me desperately hoping that what we say and do here can help them as they create filters and further explore their convictions while figuring out how or what faith has to do with any of it.

The investment this congregation continues to make in partnering with young people and their families is imperative to our collective liberation. The space that we offer online and in person,

the volunteers who show up each week to check in and invest in our amazing young people and these opportunities to get away from it all, Montreat, Massanetta, and other trips where our young people have the opportunity to breathe, to play to be challenged and to grow in understanding of themselves and the world they live in- it is vitally important.

These words from James that our pastors read from the Message translation give us lots of imagery to work with..... Bits in the mouths of horses, the rudder of a ship, the instability of fire. My healthy imagination soaks that up. Many of our sacred music has imagery that pulls us into a new awareness of our relationship with the Divine....a new posture for us to consider. One that makes the connections between our words, the listeners, the environment and the ways it takes on a life of its own once we speak. These images in James are not there to add pizzazz, they have been chosen for connection-to disrupt our shallow thinking.

Our youth and their parents are holding on to these words and this community. This summer our youth and some amazing adults traveled to the Massanetta Middle School Conference and Montreat Youth Conference with support from the GPC family of faith. Both groups of young people were vaccinated and did all they could to be safe so that they could participate in these conferences. Both groups of young people also left their phones behind at home with the intention to be more present and less distracted. Both groups had an amazing time forging a stronger community with one another and exploring how the Holy was present in it all.

Oliver said "I had a lot of fun at Massanetta this summer! It was great sharing space, telling stories and working together. The Holy Spirit I experienced was through my peers. They taught me a lot about patience and kindness throughout the time I was there. They were what made it great. I can't wait for the next Massanetta!

Harding's reflection was this: "Right into summer, heading for Massanetta. There are few greater feelings than this.

I Love Massanetta, and It's a place I can truly relax, knowing I'm surrounded by friends and family, friends already made and people I have yet to meet. It's an amazing thing, what they've done.

To be honest, I was disappointed that Gaga ball was not allowed and neither was the pool. Memories of my first trip to Massanetta include swimming in the pool and playing in the Gaga pit. But even without a Gaga pit to warm up in and a pool to cool off in, Massanetta was fun. It took me a bit to see that the Spirit was not just in the pool, so to say, but everywhere else too. For instance, instead of Gaga ball, I ran loops around the field with Blake. Instead of cooling off in the pool, I submerged myself in the creek with Laurel, Anna, and Hazel.

We weren't missing out on anything. We were making our own fun, and that was what mattered. Our group had spirit. From standing up and clapping along during the sing alongs in service to staying up late for the dance party and the closing ceremony, we were ready and

willing to have fun, even if it took a bit of effort first. And in those moments, those moments of joy and love, I felt the Spirit. We *were* the spirit.”

Dean, an adult leader, reflected: “I experienced ‘The Holy’ the week of Montreat with a combination of events.

- going every morning to energizers and singing, and keynote speakers to inspire us for the day
- Then, evening worship services definitely added to the Holy experience.
- And Our youth made a public stand against hate speech - a great story BTW -
- And GCPC youth and advisors were our own small groups and back home groups.

Therefore, the most moving experience of ‘the Holy’ that week was being with our own GCPC group:

Daily, We laughingly and seriously discussed the topics of the day each and every day in our small group; we had ‘back home devotionals’ every night, cooked and ate together, in harmony, did our chores together Acted responsibly and attentively to each other. Had fun.

I felt a Belongingness within our community that week, and it still lingers.

I felt a harmony among us, a safeness, a feeling of knowing a little more about myself and my relationship to God because I had this experience with this group, a strong feeling of belongingness, all a Holy experience to be appreciated.

What’s challenging is

- keeping this feeling of emotional safety, and recreating that closeness with them when I see them again.
- Creating a safe emotional space for all other people too...is challenging.

What’s important is: (trying to stay open-minded and attentive to people, creating an emotionally safe feeling.)

It's important to have special, retreat-like, experiences with people.

Meeting for the purpose of becoming closer to God with an intentional community was such a special and Holy experience and because we are a close group already, it is a rare thing to experience a time together so close to God and to each other, It is important that people have these experiences that are truly special and meaningful.

Friends, these experiences are oxygen in a season where the ability to breathe has been taken away or is in short supply..... Here are some more reflections that were shared...

VIDEO - Sermon 9_12 (6:43)

All of us have dealt with some technology fatigue during this pandemic. We are so over connecting online because we know how wonderful it is and feels for us to be together in person. I am not gonna argue that with you. BUT in the midst of this fatigue I want us to recognize that in this age of social media and questionable news sources, the temptation for many of us is to flee. To return to a kind of simplicity and justify this as honorable or more educated. As if being anti-technology is more holy or has more integrity and is more pure. Let us not forget, the world without technology also had some issues that were continually swept under the rug and ignored while oppressing so many.

Fleeing from this technological present is always an option but we are now a part of the predictive algorithm. Predictive algorithms are mostly frightening. This computer coding uses our current engagement with technology-what we read, where we click and how long we linger in any online space to suggest or predict what else we might be interested in. Predictive algorithms are always at work....somehow you were talking about how you wanted a new television and then while you were looking through your social media an ad for the Labor Day television sale at Best Buy pops up. In the same way, you may have looked up progressive theology or open and affirming congregations of Asheville. Predictive algorithms are at work and are a part of our navigation.

Those same algorithms have come into play when it comes to the exploration of faith and faith communities. Predictive algorithms have led people to our youtube feed. The Good News of liberation we learn about, experience and practice here at Grace Covenant repeated over technology has taken hold. We can run from it but we can also embrace the possibility that the necessity of connection for us during this pandemic has also yielded the discovery of a life saving community for folks who would have otherwise missed us completely. Social media presents an opportunity for us to share bits and pieces and the entire worship service to the world. THE WORLD The Divine will use anything and everything to reach out to us...to get us the good news.

Many conservative, evangelical, less affirming, prosperity preaching, less liberating congregations have banked- BANKED on our progressive purity holier than thou posture that has been anti-technology and anti self-promotion. Because of our collective resistance, conservative evangelicals have become more and more accessible and louder.

The text of James is right....our words and our teachings matter, the consistency of vision we hold at GCPC is water in the desert of duplicity among the loud voices claiming Christ in our world. Our silence is and will continue to be deadly. We need to reclaim testimony. The telling and re-telling of how God is showing up and breaking through in our lives. Sharing accounts, seemingly small and almost unbelievably big ways our faith and the Spirit are at work. It is the voice calling out in the wilderness.

Here at GCPC we are continually beckoning one another to deeper waters, out of the shallow and safe waters into deeper understanding, more disruption that yields a deeper trust and a more expansive vision for how we can be a beloved community.

Supremacy culture has us buying into childhood phrases like *sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me*. Broken bones do hurt but can be mended....scratches may leave a scar but they heal. Words, teachings and hasty remarks last for generations if we are not more careful.

Creation- the natural world is doing so much to inform us of the Divine truth of the choices we are making-we need to keep working toward a collective change. Our young people's future is now. Creation is literally and figuratively on fire. The ability to rebuild is dwindling.

Our young people will continue to gather here, online and in-person as it is safe because they too desperately long for good news and a community to wrestle with. They are not looking for agreement, they are looking for honest conversation with a community that has room for more, that is willing to navigate the struggle and work toward collective liberation.

My call to youth ministry has always been wrapped up in how I was seen by specific adults in my adolescence. People who listened to me, encouraged me, took time to make sure I was known and seen. I thank God for them and I pray that I can continue to do this in the lives of young people my whole life long. There is nothing like being seen.

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We are all teachers. We show up in places where folks are listening and watching. Our identity as followers of the liberating love of Jesus Christ is or isn't on full display.

I invite you to reflect on this:

- How is God showing up in you, in your speech AND your actions?
- How can we continue our collective liberation while we live into all of the chaos?
- Who can you reach out to today? Who needs to be seen by you? Who do you need to thank for seeing you?
- Where are places you might consider showing up online to sow seeds of this liberating love?

And remember....you are not alone. We will continue to gather online, we can still connect by phone and connect while we keep the safety of others in mind. Reach out, connect and repeat. We journey together in the face of a mighty strong wind that can threaten to overwhelm and take us over if we stay isolated. Keep logging-on dear ones.