



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 34

NEW SERIES 2017

ISSN 1937-8386

Opening Convocation

Inconvenient Truths

James F. Kay

Fall Opening Communion

Dreams and Realities of Community

M. Craig Barnes

Spring Opening Communion

Deadly and Life-Giving Words

Eric D. Barreto

Lectures

Populism, Patriotism, and the Preacher

Angela Dienhart Hancock

Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism

Amanda Drury

Commencement Address

The Foolish Call to Love

M. Craig Barnes

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The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published annually by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. Issues can be accessed digitally at: <http://journals.ptsem.edu/>.

Deadly and Life-Giving Words

(James 3:1–12)

Eric D. Barreto

Eric D. Barreto, Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of New Testament, delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel at the Opening Communion service for the spring semester, January 24, 2017.

I didn't know I was Puerto Rican when I was a toddler. When I was learning words and shaping them into sentences, I didn't know I was speaking Spanish. When I was little, I was unaware of the wider world around me, that there were people called different names, speaking different words, and seeing the world very differently than I did.

I became suspicious that the world was bigger than my world in elementary school. I went to kindergarten with the children of soldiers who happened to be stationed in Puerto Rico. These kids were different. They spoke English at home. They ate things like peanut butter and jelly. They ate things like meatloaf. And strangest of all, their homes had central air conditioning; the first time I stepped into a home cooled to 72 degrees I thought, "These people must be crazy. How do they live like this?" In those days, discovering new words, new ideas, new possibilities was eye-opening, life-giving. As children, we tended to delight in each other's stories, each other's words.

As you might have guessed, such wonder did not last long. I was suspicious in elementary school that the world was bigger. The fact that the world was bigger hit me in the face in middle school and high school. I was no longer in Puerto Rico. We lived in Louisiana and in Missouri and in Kansas. As an adolescent, I no longer delighted in my differences and those of others. I wanted to be like the majority of the kids that surrounded me, so much so that I would purposefully purse my lips to narrow them. I wanted to fit in more than anything. And words were used to harm me, to tell me I had no place, to tell me I didn't belong, to tell me that I had to change who I was to be loved.

In our text today, James warns us about the dangers of language—the way words can worm their way into our hearts and leave only death and distrust in their wake.

Anyone who has been at the receiving end of a bully's words knows that words are as blunt as stones, as sharp as a honed stick. We should know better than to repeat the old adage about sticks and stones, but we don't seem to grasp fully the power of words.

James 3:1–12 speaks to these realities in a vivid way. An extended reflection on the power teachers hold because of the might and danger of words, this passage compares the power of words to the destruction and proliferation of a fiery blaze. Not many should strive to be teachers, James instructs, because the office is rife with temptations. After all, the tongue—though diminutive—can lead us astray as easily as a rudder steers a ship. Our tongues can ignite a raging inferno that no one can extinguish.

The teachers James imagines are not mere dispensers of knowledge. Indeed, if we imagine that is what teachers and professors do all day, we are seriously missing the point of teaching. Instead, James imagines that teachers are communal leaders called by God to shape communities of faith that reflect the goodness and grace of that all-loving God. Such teachers do not hide behind pulpits and podiums nor are they content merely to deliver lofty lectures. The kind of teachers James hopes for instead rub shoulders with people, live in the midst of their struggles, share their griefs and joys alike. Such teachers are living examples of a life of faithful service to one's sisters and brothers.

Not many should strive to be such teachers, such leaders. This is true. The power is too great for many of us. The temptation to use our words for our own gain too tantalizing. Words are potent weapons in the hands of those who crave their power. Words are harmful whenever we wield them for our own gain and not the building up of others. Words are deadly when they deny whom God has made us to be. Words are corrosive when their meanings are twisted, used for deceptive ends. Words are caustic when they tap into our crudest instincts: fear, narcissism, self-hatred.

James is right. The tongue is a fire, its flames spreading wherever it can find a source of fuel. Literal fires thirst for oxygen. The fires ignited by half-truths and prejudice have their own potent source of energy: fear of the other, anxiety over the future, an overestimation of our own holiness and the errors of our supposed opponents.

According to James, we speak with a fundamental contradiction. With the same mouth, we praise and curse God. With the same tongue, we decry and uplift our neighbor. With the same words, we can help others or crush their hopes.

James suggests that there is never a relationship between humans and God that is not at the very same time manifest and embodied in our relationships with our sisters and brothers. In James, sin, suffering, and illness are communal hardships just as much as they are individual ills. Their alleviation is affected through communal liturgies as much as personal confession. None of us—no matter our importance in the world—are independent, unfazed atoms. Instead, we are links in an unbreakable chain. For James, there is no knowledge of God that does not force an individual to gaze into the eyes of another person and recognize her inextricable connection to others in Christian community.

In short, we are always and inevitably bound to our neighbors.

We know too well, in recent days, how right James was and is. Our words are dangerous even when they seem innocuous; our words can even be deadly even when they seem gentle. In response to the Black Lives Matter movement, some have retorted that all lives matter. That is true, of course. Ours is a God who revels in our differences and loves the particularities that makes all of our lives such reflections of God's creativity. But in wanting to silence the voices of protest, in seeking to contradict the voices that ring out "black lives matter," we miss the radical edge of such a statement. Isn't it strange that we would need to say that "black lives matter?" Shouldn't that be self-evident? Shouldn't that be obvious? To say "black lives matter" is not to diminish the value of others. It is to remind us that "black lives matter" is not yet true in our

midst. It is to remind us that our words and our deeds tell our black sisters and brothers that they in fact do not matter to us.

So, if our words are so dangerous, perhaps we should simply stop speaking. If all we will do is harm others or stumble in trying to understand or speak our way into racial conflicts, then perhaps we should just keep our mouths closed for good. Yet as much as our tongues can set a blaze of destruction, our silence can still cause a subtle spark no less deadly. Our silence is dangerous even when it is well-intentioned. Our silence can be deadly even when we think we are seeking peace.

And here we are at the beginning of a new semester. Training you with words, demanding you to respond with words in class discussions and precept prompts and final essays. And, yes, even there our words can be deadly. We can caricature our theological opponents, lying about their perspectives. We can speak in offensive and violent ways about women and people of color, putting into words the daily violence some of us experience simply because of who we are or how we embody our gender and race. And there too we can be silent. We can deny that we have anything to add to the lofty discussions going on around us and, in doing so, deny God's call upon our lives. We can deny that we have anything to learn from those who see the world differently than we do. We can deny that some cultures, some peoples, some theologies have very little to teach us.

With the same mouth, we worship God and condemn our neighbor. With the same mouth, we praise the Creator of the universe and tell some that they have no place here. With the same mouth, we sing the wonders of God and reject that we need one another—that God has drawn us together.

And this morning we confess our complicity in systems of exclusion. This morning we speak our sanction of oppression. This morning we seek God's forgiveness with the same mouth that has spoken death to the other. And this morning God will reconcile. God will forgive. God will show us a way. God will call us to use the same mouth that has spoken rejection to speak words of confession and forgiveness. And in the shadow of God's forgiveness, we will be freed to speak the truth that we are all wonderfully and marvelously and differently made.

And with the power of God, the love of Christ, and the presence of the Spirit, words meant to kill and harm just might transform into words that speak of God's resurrection power. James concludes, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh." It seems impossible. But with God it is not only possible—it is promised.