

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

March 14, 2021

Beloved \_ The House That Words Built

Dr. Dick Foth

Well, hello friends at National Community Church, perhaps I should say, beloved friends, it's great to be with you and in a couple of months, maybe we get to be together face to face, we'll see. But for the past several weeks, as you know, we've been focusing on this theme of Belov-ed or Beloved. What does it take to move from diversity to unity to beloved? How do we put flesh on that, on that idea of beloved? I propose this, that we imagine it and we nurture it with what all of us have - words. No one imagines more than a child. I mean, we chat with imaginary friends, we sing songs with imaginary groups. Our world when we're little kids is a small world outside, but a big world inside our heads. Then that day comes when we go to school and our world gets bigger. I can remember, I know it's hard, I can remember starting school at four with my oldest sister Luann, whose three years older than I up in the tea plantations of South India and you heard me talk about this in a place called Coonoor, it's a British boarding school. And there was an enclave it was toward the end of the colonial era in the late 1940s. It was an enclave and we had Australians and New Zealanders, and we had Welsh and Scots and people from London. And then around that we had Indian culture, Tamil culture with its languages, and its sounds and its practices. And when we went off to school, I don't know if this was the first day, but I think it might have been, this is what it looked like having a little footage my dad shot. This is what it looked like on that first day, going to the bus, give a look.

{ video }

So I look at that and say, well, there was a day when I was cute. I think that's why I fell in love with sweater vests, gratefully; I lost the son helmet and the umbrella. But those years, shaped my view of the world and my whole life and it was a huge gift to me. I tell people this; it helped me not to be afraid of things that were different than I. So imagining let me come back to that.

When I think of Washington, DC and imagining, I think of two people, I think of Albert Einstein, you know, you go to his statue, I used to take people there, we'd sit on his lap, take pictures down by the National Academy of Sciences. And one of the things that I loved that he said, was, and there are various versions of this, the imagination is more important than knowledge because knowledge has limits and imagination takes us everywhere. So that's one imaginer in DC in history. The other one, in my frame of reference was Peter Marshall, the former pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, about three blocks northeast of the White House. People used to stand in the rain, because they put speakers outside the church to listen to him preach because he had this way, this thing he did called a biblical newsreel where he would take a passage of scripture and then amplify it with how he imagined it. So imagine this with me. Imagine with me today, a Jewish man reflecting and I'm going to be he, I'm going to be that man. So I'm going to do this and I will be that person.

Okay, here we go. Shalom. When I was a kid, my name was Jimmy. Well, it was my given name was Yakov, which translated really means James. I grew up in a small flat roofed house with a bunch of younger brothers, Joseph and Judas and Simon and some sisters, Lydia, Joanna and Miriam up in the hills of what was then called Palestine, Syria. This was a couple 1000 years ago. It was hot in the summer, cool and rainy in the winter. There's a sea to the west, three days walk west. Sometimes on a clear day, I might be able to see just the outline of the blue on the horizon. They tell me it was three days walk, I never did it. But down below us there was a freshwater lake about three hours down and to the east. And when we were teenagers, we'd get down there a fair amount. And people said that that lake was lower than the level of the ocean. I don't understand that exactly. But it was hot down there and moist air and surrounded by hills on both sides. And the hills on the far side of the lake over to the east were about twice as high as our side. And apparently that created storms because sudden storms would come up on that lake. And some people call the lake Kinneret, some called it Tiberias, some called it a sea - Sea of Galilee. We just called it the lake. Anyway, one time I asked a noble guy why the storms came up in the spring and summer. And he explained that apparently the cool air came over the top, dropped down onto the hot air over the lake, and boom, we got storms. So I could see those storms from the hills above my house, sometimes. And the storms, apparently messed with fishermen. Some of these happened at night, and they fished at night.

So anyway, where I lived our hills has olive trees and some grapes and down in the flat area were some grain fields. And you know, we're kids, we're chasing foxes and hunting for rabbits, they're all kinds of birds. Folks in the village had donkeys and doves and stuff, the only people who had horses were military guys, these Romans that were around. Anyway, as I got older, I sort of reflect on this and it's fascinating what comes back from when you were so small, isn't it? And I remember those thunder and lightning storms at night on summer nights or the smell of olive trees on a hot summer afternoon. I still see those pictures in my head.

Our family was a good family. I hear my father singing Torah. He loved scriptures, he called it the Word. Our people of course were Hebrews, Jews, one God people. We were a tight family, tight community, centered and God. When we read the stories from Torah and the prophets, of course, we understood that historically, we had some stuff in our background, some problems. Other countries had kings and lots of gods, we only had the one. And our tendency was to wander off to their gods, and it always caused division in the community.

And our story, in our story, it said that one day a great leader would come and set us free. He would be like the Great King David 1000 years before us. And that promised moment would be when the Messiah would come, the anointed one to take us out from under the thumb of our oppressors. We had lots of oppressors; you know we were enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years. And then the Assyrians came and they took a bunch of us out and Babylonians came and now the Romans are in town they are ruling us so.

But in our family dad was a builder. I learned a little of that myself. Did I mention that I had an older brother? He was more a builder, like my dad, very bright, had insights, concepts. I see things more in pictures, in images than in those concepts. But we would go down to the feasts, you know, feasts every year in our religious system of Judaism. And once we were at Passover, my folks lost him. It took then days to find him and when they found him he was in the temple and he was confounding religious teachers. I mean, he was only 12. Okay. Anyway, he always asked the deep questions. It's a Jewish way of teaching is to ask questions. He was strong in Torah, faithful at the synagogue. He worked with my dad a lot, and really was a good carpenter and stonemason. I remember he always liked to get the the joints just right so they fit.

But as he got older into his 20s, he sort of shifted interest it seemed to me. He started doing some teaching and he's go down by the lake more and made friends with some young fishermen. And, of course, that's a tradition in our culture. We have lots of itinerant teachers in our part of the world. Its okay I guess, I mean, he really had a gift. He had some different views but then we started getting reports about things he had done, they call them miracles. And when that happened, then pushback from religious leaders came. And that caused some tension in our own village, Nazareth. Word got out that this man from Nazareth, Jesus, that's my half brother, might he be the Messiah? That actually caused tension in our family. I mean, we showed up one time to sort of straighten things out and he said, "Who are my brothers and sisters?" And then answered his own question. He said, "They're the ones who do God's will." Well that about split the family. I mean, choosing sides.

Anyway, let me finish. I loved him. I respected him as a wise teacher. But he could not be Messiah. I mean, I couldn't believe that until the religious leaders who hated him set him up. They cut a deal with one of Jesus disciples and the Romans killed him. Done. Then three days later, three days later, like he had predicted, he's back. And he showed himself to me. It makes the hair stand up on my arms, just to say it. It brings tears to my eyes; it thrills my heart to know this is true. And from that moment, I believed, I never turned back. I became leader in that movement, the Jesus followers. And when persecution happened, and they martyred Steven, they killed our friend, Steven, our group of Jesus followers was scattered. Persecution cranked up. And times were hard money wise, droughts happened, it's hard to stay connected and together when all that stuff goes on. So as a leader of the young church, I wrote a letter and it just covered several things that I felt would strengthen the bond of the brothers and sisters. I know what brothers and sisters were how that worked from my childhood. Now these scattered people were my extended family and I just wanted to encourage them, challenge them sometimes, how to follow Jesus and love each other better. That's what I wanted to do, especially in the hard times we need each other don't we especially in the hard times. Well, I'll stop now. This fella, Foth will share. He's read my thoughts, some, so I'll turn it to him.

I'm back this is Foth. And this is the letter we're looking at this weekend is from James. It has a number of emphases. It's scattershot, you know, it's not a rifle shot, like Colossians, or Philemon or something. It doesn't flow like that. It's more like, more like a conversation. But the goal is clear that the readers

would express their faith, both in words, in words, and beyond words, deeds, and speaking words is a deed. And the goal is that this scattered group of people would be wholly devoted to Jesus have moral integrity, and walk in that way.

So James as you'd heard him in my imagination described was brought up with the word of the Lord and Torah, with the Prophets, the Psalms, and with wisdom writings. And scholars would consider his writing, his letter, fitting with wisdom literature, like Proverbs. And what's interesting, is it most closely reflects the emphases and ideas of Jesus, of all the letters in the New Testament, which I think makes sense if in fact, they were in the same family.

So James is candid, he's direct, he's encouraging. He's sometimes in your face. And he talks about trials and testing and gaining wisdom, handling wealth, not playing favorites, how we treat each other, how to pray for each other for healing. And for perspective, I love this part. Back toward the last part of the letter, he says, and by the way, your life is like smoke, or mist it just psst and you're gone so how you act now counts. He's really strong in word pictures and images. It's powerful. And I love what he calls his audience. The letter, if I read it out loud, takes right around 15 minutes. And better than a dozen times, maybe 14/15 times the phrase he uses for his audiences is brothers and sisters. Literally, it says brothers, but in the context of spiritual, it means brothers and sisters. And two of those, say "brothers and sisters, dearly loved," beloved, says that. He speaks strongly in this letter in three places, about the tongue, about speech, about words.

So three kinds of speech that I find in the letter from James,

- One is God's word to us.
- Second is our words to God.
- And the third is our words to each other.

How does that work? I propose how those pieces work together, grows a beloved community. So let's get into James, James 1:16 reads like this.

Thought... in the day of shifting sands God's Word is true north and a day of shifting sands God Word is true north. I really like what my friend Dr. Gordon Fee says a wonderful New Testament scholar. This is what he said years ago, "Things are not right because they are in the Bible but because they are right they're in the Bible." If I go back for more than 70 years to that childhood in India or later if I could do a do over I'd memorize more scripture. Now I'm older and what used to be a Velcro brain is more a Teflon brain, stuff goes in and slides right off baby.

*"<sup>16</sup> Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. <sup>18</sup> He*

*chose to give us birth through the word of truth, (there's the phrase) that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."*

So there's something about scripture that soaks into the nooks and crannies of our spirit, soul, brain. I'm not a neuroscientist, don't know how all that works. But when you listen to the Proverbs - Proverbs two reads this way - *"<sup>6</sup> For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."* This is what I submit, what we receive is what we dispense. The Word of truth shapes my words. We know this from our own experience, I mean, words, spoken, signed, or written, have weight, they have power to hurt or to heal, to hammer or to help, to bring life or bring death. Your words can make me feel like heaven or feel like hell, literally.

So a loving father speaks to me and says this, "Talk to me. I've spoken to you talk to me more than that." He says, ask me. My question is, "Well, for what? He's very specific in James, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."*

Some years ago, when back in the early 2000s, I would go and visit my friend Vern Clark, who was the head of the Navy at the time for five years, almost five years. And then just two months ago, and so many things were in upheaval in our nation's capital and I just texted my friend, Senate chaplain Barry Black, who by the way, was chief of chaplains, under Admiral Clark for many years, I just texted him and said, Barry, what can we pray for and he sent me a one word text - wisdom. There's something about knowing I can walk into the throne room of the Most High and ask for wisdom and he won't call me an idiot. I love that.

So there are two tributaries in my life, hopefully, what is God speaking to us, and the other is us responding and speaking to God. At the confluence of those two is the river, that river where we spend so much of our lives speaking to, with, sometimes at each other. And that's no small challenge, because we are so different from each other. We're different from each other in 100 ways, sometimes even in the same family. I have a friend, Tex Graph, mentor of many years, who said to me early on in my ministry life, "Don't just hang out with people who are just like you Dick. What can they add to your life?"

So what's the sound of a beloved community? I would submit it's the sound of many voices, high, low, young, old, rich, reedy, accents beyond measure. We learned so much when we converse and talk. And James must think so he speaks of it more than once, in a significant way. Here he is, again, speaking, same chapter James one, *"<sup>19</sup> My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup> because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. <sup>21</sup> Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, (there we go again) which can save you. <sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves*

*religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless."*

Yoweee, what are you really thinking, James? That's just, I mean, he is full on in your face with this. Any idea what can happen when we listen, across generations? Any idea what can happen when we listen across cultures, and experiences. I mean, we've all experienced this but years ago, I was in a small group and had a friend named Larry, who was the financial aid director at a major university in Illinois we were in a small group. And one night, he was telling about the summer between his senior year in high school and his freshman year at university, when three of his friends in different locales for different reasons, that summer, all died and he was in tears. And the woman sitting next to him, turned and said, "You know, I've liked you, Larry, but I have to confess that I thought you were at a different place than I was sort of more sophisticated." I think she used I think she use the word snooty. And she said, but identify and she just put her arms around him and they wept. There's something about conversing across experiences that does things that change us.

So we have a whole world to learn when we talk, and I'm a talker, you know, this. My eldest daughter, Erica, our eldest daughter, Erica once told me, "Dad, I think you'd like the feel of words in your mouth." And those of you who know me know this is true. So this is confession time. Number one, I am more talker than listener. I was, some years ago, I called two or three close friends to go and be with another friend in the southeastern part of the United States. He was going through a difficult time that he had brought on himself, and ultimately he would end up going to prison. But we went in to spend an evening with him, had dinner and he was weeping. And later we were talking late into the night and at one point, he said, I think, I think there's a book here someplace that I need to be writing a book. And I'm younger than he by 15/16 years and he had mentored me and really done things for me but I felt so impassioned. I said, I really don't think that's a good idea. I think you need to wait and I said a few other things. On the way back to the hotel I turned to one of the other friends who was with us who taught Marriage and Family at the University of Akron, his name was Dick too and I said, "Dick don't you think it was important for our friend John to hear what I had to say?" He just smiled at me very kindly and said, "Dick, I don't know that it was important for him to hear it but you were absolutely desperate to say it." Sometimes, we talk over other people, okay, I do.

I'm not a shouter. Point two, I'm not a shouter but Ruth says sometimes I have a tone. You've heard me say this before at NCC. I'll never forget the day she said to me, "Dick, do you know how it makes me feel when you use that tone with me?" And I didn't know I had it. Do I have a tone? Do you think I got a tone? No. So words can be living stones, gracious, though and true, that build a community or they can be thrown stones to make a point or to get my way or defend a position and that won't build a community. Words are so important. They express our ideas, our thoughts, our feelings.

When I started Hebron school at four, I was off for a grand adventure. By the time I was five, the pressure of it I guess I began stuttering and for more than 20 years, I stuttered and you know this. I

considered stuttering as I aged the sort of non communicable social disease. And when I went to speech therapists, they said you think in paragraphs and you can't get the sentences out so easily. So I learned to tell jokes or I took drama where I could memorize the words ahead of time and I wouldn't get stymied or start stuttering. A few years ago, when I saw the movie, *The King's Speech* of the British monarch who stuttered and he was in a prominent position, but just saw the challenge I lived it again and I wept. For years words had escaped me. Then another person's words saved me. And again, you've heard me say this, but I can never get away from the time when I was with Ruth and we were on a date and I was feeling insecure about our relationship. And I said, "Ruth, you probably, probably, probably wouldn't want to wo, wo, wouldn't want to go with me because I can't talk." And she looked at me and smiled very sweetly and said, "Oh, really. I hadn't noticed." And that started unlocking my door and let me out.

So when we hear what James says, "*Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.*" You know, anger messes up everything really. And Dallas Willard says it this way, "Almost nothing done in anger cannot be done better without it." So I absolutely agree with Dallas's assessment. All of us in our relationships get sometimes a little tense, little, a little testy don't we? And well, I know we're not supposed to, but sometimes we do. Ruth and were driving through San Francisco with our three year old granddaughter who's now herself a mother. But some years ago, she was in her car seat in the back three or four years old and it got a little tense in the car as we were talking about something and so we just got quiet and in that quietness a small voice came from the backseat. And it just said, "I'm not saying anything."

Even James gives us some grace. When he gets to the second verse of the third chapter for us he says, "*2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*"

And he goes on to illustrate what it looks like to have one's whole body in check. It's just a small thing that controls everything else, in this case, the tongue. So he captures the challenge with of course, word pictures, a ship's rudder, the bit in a horse's mouth, a spark of fire that causes a wildfire, a fruitful tree, where you can't expect one fruit from a different kind of tree and a fresh spring. You don't want to get bad water and good water out of the same spring. It sounds a little like Jesus in Luke, in chapter six, JB Philips expression in the New Testament is this, "*For a man's words will always express what has been treasured in his heart.*" What's there will come out. And I like what it says in that wisdom literature, Proverbs 25, "The right word at the right time, is like precious gold, set in silver."

So again, a beloved community is about three things, I think, when it comes to speech, God's words to us, our words to God, and our words to each other, and with each other. Beloved Community, I think puts a premium on listening for understanding. We think about the power of words. We look for ways to build the other up. And certainly, we fight for the rights of the other.

And I think finally, I would say a beloved community finds a brother or sister who may be on the margin, and cheers them on. When I struggled all those years with my words, physically, Ruth did that.

You say, "Are you going to talk about Ruth again?" You bet I am. And now I preach these messages, the one you're hearing, I preach it to her before I preach it to you and she gives me ideas and helps. And for the guy who for two decades couldn't get words out she has one thing that she often says, "Remember, Dick less is more."

So I think the life verse of a beloved community would be Psalm 19:14, *"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."*

I close with this story and I've shared it before. Almost all my stories I've shared before but this one comes from my friend Gene Jackson, who's now gone to be with the Lord. But I knew him when he was from East Tennessee. But he grew up in Pawhuska County, Oklahoma. And he said, "I was a preacher's kid, that was a mark against me in my little country school and I was a stutterer and so kids made fun of me. But I went to this school and there was one little boy Billy who had more challenges than I did. He had been born with Down syndrome and so he had some limitations. Everybody loved Billy. And he and I became friends. So I got loved in the process. And Billy couldn't say very much. He was at a stage where he could only say things like, "Let's go eat and let's play ball." So when they had recess, Billy, they had a rule, whoever was captain of the teams, they chose Billy first. And the rules for the baseball game were that Billy always got on base. His eye hand coordination wasn't great, but he'd hold the bat out there and if you had to pitch 53 times to hit the bat it's on you, and then he'd always get on base. And he always scored, somebody dropped the ball, they overthrew, did whatever so that Billy scored. And he didn't just score, he finished, he would go and jump with both feet on that plate. And then one day, we had a county wide track and field meet, and Billy, who wasn't very fast, signed up for everything. He signed up for the 50 yard dash and 100 and the 200, whatever it was, and so they took off. And of course, in the 50 yard dash kids were done and Billy was just coming along and people said, "Look at the little kid there." And then the 100 yard dash, same thing. And somebody said, "What a good little man, what a good man." And then the 200 and finally came the 400. And of course, kids were racing around the field and they finished and he was still back on the far turn over there. And all of a sudden people who were cheering him on, people who were his friends and others who had become friends in the matter of the meet they were cheering him. And as he came around the far turn, people started coming down out of the stands that as he turned to come down the stretch people gathered around him and ran with him across the finish line and picked him up and carried him on their shoulders for a victory lap." And my friend Gene Jackson said, "Nobody can remember who won that race. But everybody can remember who finished because somebody cheered him on." There is that idea that when we are cheered on, when we are encouraged, it brings light into a dark place. And it helps us in a beloved community take the next step.

I close with this I couldn't shake a word picture I had in my head as I thought and prayed over this, thinking about when I was a little kid and I had challenges. Some of us when we were small were damaged by words. And some of us never really have gotten past it because we believed it when a big person said it we believed it. And we've tried to deal with it. But you know how it is a word or phrase,



not fitly spoken, not at the right time, not a good thing can be like a barbed fish hook fired into our soul. And we haven't found a way to dislodge it. And it's just sort of rusted there. There's only two ways I know to dissolve that rusty old hook and that's the word from God to us and we saturate it with that word. And the words of a beloved brother or sister to us that also saturates it. So I'd like to pray for you and pray for myself at the same time as a beloved community.

Father, thank you for this moment. For though that person or those persons who feel like they have something lodged deep in their soul, from a long time past, even in this moment, might your Holy Spirit, do something profound there. A word, a phrase, a verse, may it be confirmed and affirmed by brothers and sisters who know us. Thank you, Lord, that we can be a community that has a goal. We want to be whole, we want to be together and we want to speak words that encourage and challenge and make us one because you are that God. You are the Word. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was real. In Jesus name, amen.

God bless you see in a couple of months I hope, bye bye.