

What kind of a spark are you?

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

September 12, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Remember the campy hymn:

It only takes a spark, to get a fire going...¹

Sparks can be heart-warming, an inspiring kind of contagious. Sparks, however, can also ignite destructive fires. Today's wisdom according to James is aimed at those the writer refers to as teachers, but any of us with influence on one or more people might head this warning: the witty metaphor of a tongue that starts a forest fire.

We have all been changed by these pandemic times. I am visibly different from a year ago when we worshipped together in a sanctuary, but being isolated, stressed, we have seen political polarization. People adopting more extreme perspectives, thanks in part to the ease of posting on social media – not having to see the face of someone who differs from us.

Equally, though, there have been enormous demonstrations of compassion, solidarity, work for peace, and neighbourly love. Case in point: just yesterday, on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 seeing politicians who would in other circumstances be seeking political points against one another, instead they stood together and called for unity, and watchfulness for those who sow the seeds of hatred.

In times of loss, there is capacity in us for fire in our words, just as there is also the desire to seek and give love. That caricature that James presents, of those who are “boastful” and some “who cut others down” – who, metaphorically set fires ablaze – it seems like hyperbole, an exaggeration. Whose behaviour was James calling out? Scholars don't know, but we know that politics can catalyze such fires. No warming campfire when our deeply held beliefs are challenged by words or values of another person. A political pundit said just yesterday that Canadians can expect in the Federal election to go negative in this final week. How many of you are surprised?

That's just the problem: as I mentioned last week, deeply in our DNA is fight or flight in politically charged times. We expect aggressive posturing, political opportunism on tv, but we also fear conflicts in our families and neighbourhoods. I've already seen it, the appearance of political sign on a friend's lawn (cue the ominous background music). I suspect that the strategy of choice is to *bridle our mouths*. James suggests that here, and I'm paraphrasing here: *If you can't bridle your mouth, maybe you should shut up.*

The problem is, sometimes that is just not realistic advice, working only until we accidentally bump into said neighbour and the some politically charged, or theologically problematic Issue comes up in the conversation. I recall the advice of my elders in childhood – the wisdom that, when I'm angry, resist the instinct to “react” for 10 or 20 seconds. Staying silent for a moment, reciting the mantra: Loving my neighbour who is different from me.

¹ “It Only Takes a Spark”, *Voices United 289*

At Camp McDougall this summer, with 7-10-year-olds, I journeyed through the Bible story where Jesus was teaching early in the morning and the religious leaders dragged a woman in front of him.² They accused her of violating her marriage vows; trying to bait Jesus, they asked him if she should not be stoned for her sin. What is most interesting in this story is what Jesus does in response to this emotionally charged moment. Jesus bends down and doodles in the sand. No particular word or image is described by the storyteller, just that Jesus doodles. He seems to have been creating some spiritual space for him to find love, and he responds powerfully to the antagonist religious leaders by inviting the one who has not sinned to “cast the first stone.”

Sparks can reinforce extreme viewpoints, polarization, prejudice, violence, fear, ignorance. Alternative Sparks can generate unconditional love, community, compassion. What kind of spark do you seek to be?

² John 8: 1-11 – to find this passage, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8%3A+1-11&version=NRSV>