

Sermon title: Schadenfreude
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James 3:5-11 (opening NT reading. Used Jonah 3:10 through 4:5, and Micah 6:8 as OT readings. Also, Psalm 100 as a responsive reading)

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? (The word of God—thanks be to God)--

Please pause with me for prayer: Holy God – in this precious hour, we pause and gather to hear your word– to do so, we break from our work responsibilities and from our play fantasies; we move from our fears that overwhelm and from our ambitions that are too strong, Free us in these moments from every distraction, that we may focus to listen, that we may hear, that we may change. Amen

The readings this morning might, at first glance, appear to be disparate and unconnected. In the dozen or so times I have had the privilege to preach to a full congregation—this is the first time I chose the topic, or named the sermon BEFORE knowing the text I was going to use. I became aware of this word—Schadenfreude—last summer. While it is a new word to me, I continue to be surprised at how many people are familiar with it, and what it means.

Just like it sounds, it is a German word. There is no good English language equivalent for it—just the definition—“taking delight (or pleasure) in the misfortune of others.”

Schadenfreude—it sounds sinister, more than a little dirty—

“-- the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing”—

Perhaps this was one of the “sins of the tongue” that James had in mind when he wrote the words of the New Testament reading??? I am not sure if the word itself--- Schadenfreude—is cursing—it certainly doesn’t sound like blessing to me!

I am still not sure why I was so taken with the word, and why it has lingered with me all summer. Perhaps it has to do with where we live—and where I, and many of you work—although we live near—many of us work IN—the national capital—we could also see it as the (or a) capital of Schadenfreude as well! Over the past years our news media, our entertainment, and our politics (both governmental and interpersonal) seem to me to have taken on an increasingly personal—hard edged—and mean spirited tenor. It is not enough to win—the opponent must be brought down—hurt—humiliated publicly. It is not enough when a relationships end—hurt and pain must be meted out.

And this isn’t just politics—this seems to be almost “normal” in our every-day lives.

How many of us have NOT “taken delight” in seeing the person who tail-gated us—perhaps flicked the lights on and off—and then sped by-- pulled over a little farther down the road? Hu Hu Hu—hope he gets a BIG ticket—Hu Hu Hu—

The political candidate you oppose is caught in some scandal. It is not enough to see them lose their office, and perhaps even their freedom, Hu Hu Hu—that really fixes them—Hu Hu Hu—

You predicted (repeatedly) that housing prices were going too high—now people have lost their homes—you want to remind everyone that you predicted this—“those people” just got what they deserved--- Hu Hu Hu--- they should have listened to me—Hu Hu Hu

When church groups and others were going (and still are going) to New Orleans to help rebuild after hurricane Katrina—there were (and continue to be) those who said—why should I care? Those folks should help themselves. Those folks deserve what they got. If they are too lazy to rebuild—let them move. Worse

There are those who appear to have taken some perverse delight in the continued suffering of the people in the stricken area. “those people knew they lived in a flood plain”—they just got what they deserved for staying there”--- Hu Hu Hu-- Fools—Hu Hu Hu--

We seem fascinated with media coverage and reality programming that puts the pain and suffering of others in front of us every day. Not only do we feel compelled to watch, but many of our society seem to feel compelled to show us their suffering, pain, or humiliation. Like the word—schadenfreude itself—it seems just a little dirty—just a little sinister—but it is so hard to resist! --- And I wonder what this all does to our capacity to care and react properly—does this help make us more and more—perhaps totally—immune to the suffering of others?

If it is any comfort—at least none of this is new. Go back to the Old Testament reading on Jonah!

“⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. “

Waiting to see what would become of the city. You would think that once Jonah had FINALLY done the job God called him to do—he would have at least hoped the people would repent and be saved—now that might have resulted in Jonah improperly taking credit for SAVING “those people”--- or, perhaps, if he had cared he might have stayed and tried to save just a few of them himself—but to go out and sit down and wait to see what torments God would visit on them—that is hoping for the opportunity to engage in Schadenfreude—sitting down to wait for the chance to voyeuristically take pleasure in the misery, grief, destruction of others.

Do you ever put yourself into the characters when you read? I always do—I guess that is why I don’t like books or stories that are too sad—or where the main character suffers with no ‘redemption’—or where the main character turns out to be bad—from the time I was a kid—I could always picture this episode with Jonah. I have just the picture of Nineveh in my mind even now— do you know what-- that it looks remarkably like Wheeling West Virginia in the 1960s? Coal smoke and all! Imagine that!!! And, I know just where Jonah sat to watch—it was on the Ohio side—high up on a hill, looking down on that city—(I know it said

“East of the city”—but they just must have gotten the translation wrong somehow)-- I always pictured Jonah just sitting up there-- with a snack and a drink-- saying—OK—let’s see how God is going to wipe yunz all out (Some of you would say You ‘all—but remember—this is MY fantasy image—OK--)-- will He bring the river up and flush yunz all away? Will he just flop the mountain on your side down on yunz? Will he send bolts of lightning--- MMMMh—if he does that, maybe this spot up on the hill is not the best place to be—

So, none of this is new. In Ecclesiastes 1:9-14 we are reminded-- -- What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. {10} Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.-- -- -- but old or new—Schadenfreude is still mean—still something to be resisted—still something Christians must struggle against.

There are many, many more stories we could share about individuals, groups, even large segments of the general public showing almost gleeful delight in the discomfort, disaster, humiliation, of others-- but instead let’s talk about the alternatives.

I don’t know WHY we find pleasure when others fall down—it does not profit us—it does not build us up—in fact—it does just the opposite. It is way beyond me to try to figure that out. Do we feel that hopeless—that we do not think we can be built up—so our only alternative is to pull others down in order to have a better position RELATIVE to them? (During the cold-war—there was a story about the difference between America and the Soviet Union—the story was that in America if a farmer had one cow and his neighbor had one cow they would go into partnership to build up their heard and buy a bigger farm. In the Soviet Union, if a farmer had one cow—he hoped his neighbor’s cow would die so he could be better off than his neighbor.) -- -- now-- to all of you who I told there would not be any agriculture in the sermon today—sorry—I just couldn’t help myself--- someday I will have to form my own chapter of “agriculturalists anonymous”--

That little story however—is very much in keeping with Jesus’ teachings and the other writings in the New Testament. Jesus, and the NT writers continued to say that we were to build others up, that we were responsible for those less fortunate, that we were not to covet or envy what others did have. Again and again we are told that the world will know us through our love and mercy—

Jesus also warned us “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea” He gave us the parable of the vineyard workers—it was no-one else’s business if some were paid the same for fewer hours. He gave us the parable of the prodigal son—it was not the older brother’s place to enjoy—or prosper from the fall of the younger-- Every instance of someone showing pleasure in the misfortune of others (Schadenfreude) I can think of in either the Old or New Testament resulted in a rebuke from God!!!

The beauty of Jesus’ love, and our Christian community is that the more we share it, the more it grows—we do not grow when others fall—and we certainly do not grow when we help others to fall-- so, our NATURAL reaction to the misfortune of others SHOULD be compassion and a strong desire to help—never pleasure—but we are human--

Just because the 10 Commandments do not include “thou shalt not Schadenfreude”—does not mean it is OK for Christians to willingly and eagerly participate.

The first Old Testament reading today focused on what God DOES WANT FROM US--- it is a very short list—simple as written—although not nearly so simple to live out—

To serve God – to pursue a life of Christian faith-- means to build others up, to show compassion, to share, to be the hands, eyes, ears, feet, heart—and yes even the tongue of our Lord Jesus in our own community, in our own place, and in our own time--- That German word that I started with— and what it means—well it just does not have any place here any more!

to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God—that is what God demands of us-- AMEN.

Benediction

Life is short, -- and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us,-- -- We have NO TIME for Schadenfreude,-- -- so be swift to love,-- -- make haste to be kind, -- -- and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, be with you now and remain with you always. -- -- Amen.

--Henri-Frederic Amiel, (1821-1881)