



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Reimagining Scripture Through a Different Lens**

James 3: 2-12; 4: 11-12

Alicia Reese

September 19, 2021

The book of James is a letter that's written to numerous churches, meaning a rather wide audience. I wonder how his audience received his words, because I find his writing style – a rapid-fire-question-and-answer kind of diatribe, combined with a dense number of metaphors – to be a little overwhelming. It makes you have to stop, think, backtrack, and maybe reread. I guess it's a good thing this was and is a letter, rather than a speech. But even though it felt it overwhelming and confusing at times, the author's passion is evident and has the effect of stirring emotion in the reader, making you want to understand more. Or at least this was true for me, and not only did I want to gain a better understanding, I wanted to find deeper meaning in his words.

Whenever we read Scripture, it's important to read it contextually, taking into account the time and place of its original audience and intent. This enables us to take words that may no longer be appropriate or applicable to our lives and context, and rather than try to force them to fit, or force ourselves to try and understand something we aren't meant to, allows us to glean wisdom and meaning for our context. Often, it is our own context, societally, personally, that has a transformational power on the words. Other times it requires some creativity and ingenuity on the part of the reader. This week, I was lucky enough to experience my context transform James's words.

In addition to my work and ministry here at First United, I spend a good deal of time serving in the Chicago Presbytery, specifically around the work of anti-racism and dismantling systemic racism. We have been hard at work continuing our training and preparing to lead workshops in the Presbytery that will move us one step forward in our mission to dismantle systemic racism in our institutions. And because of how steeped in this work I am, I could not help but draw connections between the scripture and this important work.

So, I leaned into it and decided to write what I was hearing while reading the Scripture. This is one of my favorite things I started doing in seminary. It all began with writing short stories of unnamed women in the Bible for a class final, specifically in the book of Judges: Jephthah's daughter, the Levite's concubine, and one of the girls of Shiloh stolen to be a wife of the tribe of Benjamin. I gave them each a life, I wrote *their* stories. I found that my desire to creatively expand on or reimagine Scripture is evidence of how meaningful and timely these passages still are, and in doing so, embraced them into the current context.

In this case, this letter from James was brought squarely into my context of anti-racism work, work that I believe we are all called to do, work that is foundational to our call of being disciples of Christ.

This meant that my interpretation of the first part of this Scripture strays from the intent of the metaphors a bit, but I do return to the author's intent and overall message of Scripture — love.

I invite you to listen and hear this passage again with some changes to it, and through the lens of anti-racism work; afterward we will engage in a time of silent reflection.

All of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes is perfect, and we are not perfect because we are human. So, because we are not perfect, our society, laws, and systems function to keep us "in check," to make us obedient, to make us fall in line, like the use of a bridle and a bit in the mouth of a horse to give one full control of the horse's body and movement.

Look at a ship: so large, it takes strong winds to drive it, and yet it is guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs it. We as a people are large in number. Like the small rudder beneath the water, the rudder that controls us often goes unseen, because white dominant culture is something we have been socialized not to see. But its underlying assumptions, assigned values, and subliminal messaging of superiority and inferiority have been the strong winds that move us along since our beginning, at the will of the few in power, the pilots who continue to boast of their exploitations and conquests. Such privilege they have, controlling the ship.

This is how a great forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And racism is a fire, small in its acts by individuals, but all-consuming when we realize those individuals make up our

institutions; the fire spreads, unstoppable, causing destruction to all in its path, for fire does not discriminate who it burns. Racism is placed among our people as a world of immoral or grossly unfair behavior, staining the whole of society. Every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed, but racism seems untamable, a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Because of its insidiousness, we have all ingested this odorless, tasteless poison, without knowing it, without realizing its effects, maybe ever – but it can be detected in our actions, and often in the words our tongue produces.

With our tongue we bless the Lord our God, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, sisters, siblings: This shouldn't be the case! Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree yield grapes, or a grapevine figs? No more can saltwater yield fresh. We were created out of love and commanded to love and care for all of creation. But too often we spew words of hatred and commit acts of violence against one another, when we and our tongues were created to spread and speak love.

Very truly, I tell you, do not speak evil or be violent toward one another, for whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law, the law of love. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So, who, then, are you to judge your neighbor? Who, then, are you to defy God's law, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself"?

Short time of silence for reflection...

- I wonder what your experience of this reading was like.
- I wonder what you heard, what you saw.
- I wonder if it stirred emotions in you.
- I wonder what emotions those might have been.
- I wonder what you might take with you.

Amen.