

I have started a lot of sermons a lot of different ways, but I must say, I never expected to start one with the words of the well-known philosopher, Katy Perry. Ok, obviously I'm kidding about the philosopher part, but not about the source of the quote I came across this week. While covering Perry's acceptance of the Video Vanguard award at the MTV Video Music Awards this week, People magazine brought up several portions of an interview she did with Howard Stern (clearly, an obvious source for sermon fodder) a few years ago when addressing the alleged feud between herself and Taylor Swift. When asked about the rift between the two of them and what caused it, here is what she said, "Gossip in life can take the elevator, but the truth takes the stairs. It just takes time."

It wasn't a full acknowledgment of what had gone down between the two of them, but it was a statement that whatever others were saying about them didn't matter, they were going to sort it out together, but it was going to be a process that took time, because that's what the truth requires—time. The gossip that ran rampant around them did nothing but feed and fuel a media cycle that runs a lot faster than even the most high-tech of elevators, because that's what gossip does, it runs and runs and runs and it sets fires at every stage, leaving wreckage in its wake, uncaring of the damage.

I was slightly startled by how struck I was by this quote and even more startled when I realized that it had gospel relevance, but hey the Lord moves in mysterious ways and sometimes you just have to turn to Katy Perry to find your inspiration. I would highly doubt that James would find this amusing, and would probably be flabbergasted that the eloquence of his letter, his words of wisdom and advice led me to someone who sang a song about waking up in Vegas, but here we are. Gossip takes the elevator and even if he would question the source, James would agree that when fueled the words of our mouths, yeah, gossip is a high speed train running fast.

Let's start with a little background here, because Lutherans have not always had the best relationship with the book of James, thanks to Luther's utter disdain for the entire book. At one point, Luther actually referred to the book as "an epistle of straw" and advocated that it should be excised from the New Testament altogether. For Luther, he felt that it flew in the face of the theology he was trying to get the church to sign on to, one focused on grace and God's redeeming power, as opposed to the work of our own hands. Luther had no tolerance for a book that talked about faith in association with works and so he just wrote the entire thing off, and yet...there is so much here...

The historical theory behind James is that it was actually written by Jesus' brother, who in the years after the crucifixion became the leader of the Jerusalem church until he was martyred in the years leading up to fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He wrote his letter as a practical guide for how faith is lived out. It's not filled with deep theology and reflections on who his brother was, but advice on how to live as those who believe in the world his brother created, advice on how faith thrives and survives in a world on the brink of insanity. He wanted people to know how faith could be put into action so as not to fall back into old habits where faith is simply preached and not practiced. You can see where that made Luther a bit twitchy.

But let's think about this...think about all these stories we hear in the gospel about Jesus' relationship with his family. We have the moments where they tried to haul him out of the synagogue when he was preaching, rumors that they too thought he had lost his mind a little bit, the underlying fear of what his reputation and actions were going to do to them. And we have to imagine that James was right there for it, witnessing what was happening, for all we know, he too was like what in the world is going on with my brother? It's possible as the years went on he realized the impact all of those moments had on his faith, on his life, and so as he began to reflect, he realized there were things he needed to say, moments he needed

to rethink because he hadn't always gotten it right. So as he's writing, he's probably thinking about all the times he witnessed the words of others, or himself, adversely impact his brother, his life and his ministry.

As James is deeply reflecting on the vast and various things that impact our faith and how it operates in the world through our actions, he hones in on what he identifies as the biggest determiner of how that is going to play out—our words. If faith without actions is dead, then faith with hypocritical words is false. He lays it out pretty starkly, without mincing any words, “With it we bless the Lord and Creator, and with it we curse those 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.” If that isn't clear enough he draws comparisons between the inability of a fig tree to yield figs and olives, or a spring of water to gush out both fresh water and salt. It is not possible. It can't be both. He likens our tongues to the smallest flicker of fire which can set off an entire blaze. One word can impact the whole world, one word can impact our entire body and soul, one word can seep poison throughout our life of faith.

And the thing is...we know this. How often do we tell kids to think before they speak, that if they don't have anything nice to say then to not say anything at all? How many of you were threatened with or experienced

getting your mouth washed out with soap for things you said? How many of us have said to a kid that we don't say things like that? All of us. And yet, it's almost as if we think that once we hit a certain age, those things no longer apply because the world is complicated and require hard things to be done and it can't all just be sunshine and rainbows all of the time. So sure we know all of this, probably would nod along with James like amen, man, but when confronted with the reality of it in our own lives we want nothing to do with seeing how the things we say have a direct impact on our faith.

I mean let's start small...you know that moment when you're behind someone in the grocery store and they're walking just a smidge too slow? Or they're blocking the aisle and you can't help but grumble something under your breath? Tiny little flame that fans you away from kindness and love. When that colleague at work lingers a little too long in your office talking about absolutely nothing work related and then you vent to your co-workers later because isn't it annoying? Another little flame that flickers you away from care of neighbor. When you see that Facebook post and can't help but just let your fingers fly in comment and push send before even thinking through what you said? That little flame flickers against your faith. When you heard the news about the most recent shooting here in the city and your words were harsher about that than about any other string of school

shootings because of the race of the kids involved? Those flames start creeping against professing that God shows no partiality. When the news covers something about LGBTQIA+ rights or banned books or drag queens and words fly out of your mouth in heated frustration because why does everyone have to *talk* about this stuff all the time? The tiny spark ignites angst in your heart that has nothing to do with God. Let's be real and let's go there, how many of us had any number of conversations about the presidential debate this week? Maybe we threw out comments about childless cat ladies or pets being eaten. Maybe we said something disparaging about one group or another. Those sparks quickly become flames that draw us away from any ability to see the world through the eyes of God who made it and only through the lens of our own biases, prejudice, and sometimes all out hatred.

We cannot bless God and curse one another, it just doesn't work. We cannot profess a faith in a God who died on the cross for all and then expound who we think that doesn't include. I mean break down the Lord's Prayer. We say "*Our* Father," but would also quickly say who we don't think God watches over and loves. We say "Hallowed be thy name," but then will tell others, in the name of God, in the word of the Lord, why they are less than worthy of love and grace. We pray for God's kingdom to come

and God's will to be done, but once Jesus starts talking to us about justice and oppression and care for the poor and the marginalized, well then God's will becomes our will and we're designing the kingdom to our own specifications. "Give us this day our daily bread," but please do not give anyone else any hand outs, there are people just scamming the Welfare system so they don't have to work, and ya know there are a lot of lazy people out there, but by all means give me my bread, and let's keep raising grocery prices. We ask fervently for forgiveness, over and over and over again, but there is that family member we're never going to talk to again because of that one thing they said that one time that we don't even really remember all that well. Lord, deliver us from evil...unless we're the ones interested in perpetrating it for wealth, power, or our world's addiction to violence, then we can rethink deliverance. Suddenly a lot of tiny flames have become a raging fire and we can't differentiate what is a faithful response and what is just our own desires.

I can't believe I'm saying this but Katy Perry was right, the truth takes time, and it takes some grace with ourselves to learn from our mistakes and correct the words of our hearts, but we cannot forget that it is a faithful calling to do so. May the words of our hearts and the words of our lips reflect the stairs of faith, and not the elevator of hate. **AMEN!!!**