**The Problem of Knowledge**

**Text: James 3:7-10**

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A sportswriter was interviewing 3 umpires. He asked them, “How do you tell if a pitch is a ball or a strike?

The first umpire was just a rookie and he said, “Well, I calls ‘em as I sees‘em.”

The second umpire was more experienced. He said, “I calls ‘em as they *are*.”

The third umpire was a real veteran. He said, “They ain’t *nothin*’ till I calls ‘em

That story underscores the power of words. Just by calling out one word – “STRIKE” – an umpire can change the course of a ballgame. If a pitch is called a strike, maybe it’s the end of the game and the team at bat loses. If a pitch is called a ball, maybe the batter ends up on first base and it starts a rally and the team at bat wins.

Words are powerful things, for better or for worse. And the *knowledge* – or lack thereof – that is *reflected* in words can be *equally* powerful. Words have a power like a two-edged sword: they can cut either way. And we see this in the juxtaposition of our scripture reading from the Letter of James and our Call to Worship from the prophet Isaiah. The prophet celebrates the fact that he has the tongue of a teacher; that he has a word from the Lord with which to sustain the weary. That’s a good thing! James, on the other hand, almost laments the role of the teacher, because he knows how much damage the tongue can do; how much damage words can do.

Words are powerful things. But, are they a good thing, or a bad thing? And what about the knowledge that stands behind those words: something good or something bad? Well, it depends on what kind of knowledge you’re talking about. The 3 umpires are helpful, because they reflect 3 approaches to knowledge: relativism, absolutism, and theism. If we understand what kind of knowledge we’re dealing with, and what kinds of words spring from that knowledge, we’re in a better position to assess the virtue or the danger of both words and knowledge.

So, relativism, absolutism and theism: Let’s consider each of these in turn.

The first umpire said, “I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.”

This is relativism: which understands that knowledge depends on context, and perspective. The umpire isn’t absolutely sure that what he calls a strike *really is* a strike; the best that he can say is, “It *looks to me* like a strike, based on my perspective. I calls it as I *sees* it.”

All human knowledge is relative. It’s based on what we’ve experienced, how we remember, what we’ve been told and what we haven’t been told, what we’ve read and what we haven’t read. I know something and I’m pretty sure that I’m right. You know something very different and you’re pretty sure that you’re right. But we’ve read different things, we’ve experienced different things, we’ve been influenced by different mentors and different philosophies. So we can both hold our very different positions with integrity. We just need to remember that the truth of our very different positions is contingent upon our very different contexts. Relativism says that human knowledge isn’t absolute; it’s relative. Relative, that is, to our very limited experiences and contexts. As St. Paul says, “We know only in part; our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect” (1 Corinthians 13:9).

For example: How many of you all hate liver? How many of you all know – you just *know* – that liver is the worst meat ever? Raise your hands. Okay, thanks; you can put your hands down. Now, how many of you all know – you just *know* – that liver is actually pretty good? Raise your hands. Ok. Based on your very different experiences, you’re both right. The difference, of course, is how it’s cooked. My mother cooked liver with bacon and onions and apples, and it was quite tasty. But the liver that we ate at Hiram College…it was *awful*! Just a gray slab of *yuk*! If you’ve had liver cooked by itself, you *know* it’s bad news. But gooped-up with other stuff, you *know* it’s pretty good. Knowledge is relative; it depends on context and experience.

What James is talking about is people with *relative* knowledge who are acting like they have *perfect* knowledge; people acting like they know it all. These are the folks whose tongues have not been tamed by humility. It’s like Lucy in the Peanuts comic strip when she said, “Those of you who think you know it all are bothering those of us who really do!” As the saying goes, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” It can cause bad things to happen. That’s why James is so cautious about the use of the tongue. “From the same mouth can come blessing and cursing,” he says (James 3:10). It all depends on whether it’s a humble and disciplined tongue, or a tongue that claims far more knowledge than one really has. It all depends on whether one respects the relative nature of knowledge, or if one imagines that they have some kind of an overarching perspective that need not be tempered by the opinions and insights of others.

The second umpire suffered from this illusion of thinking that he knows more than he really does. “I call them as they *are*,” he claimed. He’s stepped beyond a healthy relativism and into an arrogant absolutism. He’s forgotten that how he calls balls and strikes is influenced by the way he was taught to call them, and the precise position in which he’s standing behind the plate, and the speed with which information travels from his eyes to his brain to his mouth. He too calls them as he sees them, but he *imagines* that he has some kind of super and perfect perspective from which he can call them as they really are. That pitch that he just called a strike; it was ever so slightly outside; it was really a ball. But it *looked* like a strike to him, so he honestly called it a strike. And when the manager comes out of the dugout to argue the call, the umpire is on the horns of a dilemma. He can’t allow his authority to be questioned; that would throw the whole game into jeopardy. So he has to pretend that he knows more than he really does. And anyway, since he’s an absolutist, he really does think that he’s right, regardless of what anyone else says. So, the umpire insists that it was a strike, and when the manager continues to protest, he throws him out of the game. The umpire has the power to do that.

But it was a ball all along! The batter shouldn’t be out, and the manager should still be in the dugout. First the umpire made a mistake, and now he’s created an injustice. Which is to say that when you combine arrogance of knowledge with arrogance of power, *really* bad things can happen.

The absolutist is absolutely sure that he’s right; even when it can be easily proven that he’s wrong. For example: a few weeks ago Helen and I were driving back from Indianapolis on a Friday night. We stopped for gas and Helen went inside while I filled the tank, and then I waited for her to come back out. Well, I waited and I waited and I waited. It had been maybe 10 minutes and I’m thinking, “What’s taking her so long?” Then I started to get worried. I decided to park the car, go inside and investigate. So I open the door…and there’s Helen! She’d been sitting in the car all along. Must’ve gotten in while I was pumping the gas. But I *knew* that she was still inside the gas station; I just *knew* it!

Sometimes we can be absolutely certain of something, and be absolutely wrong. But the absolutist doesn’t recognize this fact. If she’s convinced that something is right or something is true, than it *is* right; it *is* true. End of conversation! There’s no need to investigate further or listen to anyone.

James calls the tongue of the absolutist, “a restless evil; full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). And, of course, much of the trouble with Washington these days is that you’ve got absolutists all over the place wagging their tongues; some on the right and some on the left. And they’re all afflicted by the arrogance of knowledge. They all claim to know more than they really do, and no one is listening to anyone else. But at the moment – *at the moment* – the ones on the right are the more dangerous because they also have the power and, as we said, when arrogance of knowledge is combined with arrogance of power, *really* bad things can happen. Which is why the Founders built into the Constitution a very clear separation of powers. These men were realists. Probably because, like John Adams, they listened to their wives. These men were realists who understood the sinful nature of humanity; the sinful desire for power that afflicts us all. They knew, with James, that we live in a world of iniquity (James 3:6). And the Founders knew that in such a world, when one faction, or one philosophy, dominates all three branches of government – as it did the British government in 1776 – *really, really* bad things can happen. As James says, an undisciplined tongue in that context “stains the whole body [and] sets on fire the cycle of nature” (James 3:6).

Now, as I said, at the *moment* the greater threat is on the right. But there have been, and there will be, moments when the greater threat is on the left. The basic problem is arrogance and inordinate power, not political philosophy.

The first umpire – the relativist – said, “I call ‘em as I sees ‘em.” The second umpire – the absolutist – said “I calls ‘em as they are.” The third umpire said, “They ain’t nothin’ till I calls ‘em.” Which is fine as long as the third umpire is none other than the *Ultimate* Umpire; which is to say that the only One who can *legitimately* say, “They ain’t nothin’ till I calls ‘em,” is *God*. Unlike our feeble attempts at pretending that we have absolute knowledge, God *really does* have absolute knowledge. Our words all come from a relative and partial perspective, but *God’s* Word comes from that ultimate and absolute perspective which defines all things, which judges all things, which calls into being all things. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” says John’s gospel. “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:1-3). God’s Word – and *only* God’s Word – calls all things into being, and defines all things with perfect accuracy, and is the final basis for judging whether or not a word, or what passes for knowledge, or anything else, is true. There’s the relative truth which we discern from our limited perspectives, and there’s the ultimate Truth which God alone can discern from God’s all-inclusive perspective, and the two may or may not have anything to do with each other. The best that we can do with our relative truths is to *point* to God’s Truth with humility, while being prepared for the possibility that we might be wrong. The best that we can do is to proclaim the truth *as we understand it*, while listening to others proclaim the truth *as they understand it*, and through such humble listening and understanding we can try to hear something of God’s Truth that transcends our partial perspectives.

It helps to listen to those with whom we disagree.

It helps to consider the findings of science.

It helps to open our Bibles on a regular basis, and listen for God’s Word.

An undisciplined and arrogant tongue – especially one that claims to speak from God’s perspective – can poison the whole body. There’s something to be said for bridling our tongues until we’ve stopped, looked and listened long enough to truly understand a situation. Because what we think we know isn’t always the truth. The best that we can do is “calls ‘em as we sees ‘em.” Only God can call them as they really are. Amen.