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I've gotten hooked on playing a game, which I can do from either my computer or my phone. It's called Words With Friends, which is very similar to the board game Scrabble you may have played years ago as a kid. Remember that game?

In Words with Friends, you and a friend spell words, getting points for the letters played. Since each player takes a turn and sends it electronically to the other player, I may have to wait for days until the other player sends me a word. Or if we both happen to be playing at the same time, words will appear within a few minutes of sending each other a word.

While playing this game, I'm often amazed at the words we can create. I sometimes even try to use a set of letters to spell something that seems to be a word, only to discover it's not a real word. Sometimes I put together a set of letters, not sure whether it really is a word, and discover it does mean something. I then go to my electronic

dictionary to find out what I spelled, hoping it's not a word that could offend the other player.

I imagine if the biblical writer James could have played this game, he would have checked his words very carefully before sending them, for he was fully aware of the powerful nature of words. In the letter he wrote to the church, he offered very practical advice on how to get along with others. In the third chapter of this letter, he addressed teachers. He suggested that they should control their words, just as one who rides a horse uses a bit to control the direction of the horse, we should control our words, for the direction they go once they leave our mouths could bring harm or hope.

James then used the imagery of a ship, something so large that it takes strong winds to push it across the sea. And yet, he wrote, something as small as a rudder guides the huge ship across the water.

This imagery of a rudder reminded me of the days when I used to sail a small sailboat across the

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lake. If the wind did not blow, I would sit there in the middle of the lake, waiting for a breeze to fill the sails, muttering unkind words about the lack of wind. But when the breeze finally arrived, the boat would suddenly begin to move. I sat at the back of the boat, holding onto the rudder, steering the ship across the choppy water until I arrived near the other side of the lake. As I neared the other side of the lake, it was time to use the rudder to turn around the boat to head back in the direction I came, creating a diagonal pattern back and forth across the surface of the lake.

In order to turn the boat, I had to shift to the other side of the boat while still holding onto the rudder, being careful to watch the boom of the sail as it swung across from one side of the boat to another. It was a bit tricky to keep track of all these steps, for if I didn't move quick enough or keep watch, the boom could hit me in the head as it swung from one side to another. In the midst of all these steps, I had to always be sure to keep my

hand on the rudder, for if I let go, the boat could get caught by the wind and flip over (which happened numerous times!)

I think that's why James used the imagery of the rudder, for a rudder has the potential to guide one to safety, but if unwatched, it has the potential for disaster. You may recall times when you have been the victim of harsh words, said either intentionally or by accident. Cutting words can have a huge impact on us, as was the potential situation in the story about the famous nineteenth-century preacher, Henry Ward Beecher. One Sunday, he ascended the great pulpit of Boston's Plymouth Congregational Church, [a movement that later merged with the Evangelical and Reformed churches to become what we know today as the United Church of Christ. On the pulpit] ... he found a note waiting for him. Beecher glanced at the note, then announced, "I received a letter from one of you this morning. It states quite simply, 'Fool.'" Beecher paused, then grinned

maliciously. “I often receive letters from people who forget to sign their names,” he said, “but this is the first time someone has signed their name and forgotten to write the letter.”¹

I remember those childhood words that kids often said when others were teasing them: sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” I think most of us agree that words can hurt, and although the bruises from sticks and stones will eventually heal, the wounds from hurtful words often rumble around in our minds for years. That’s why James cautioned those in the church thousands of years ago, but it’s amazing how much truth his words still have for us today.

Words and images can still create havoc today, as is the case with those who have become upset with a brief video posted online about the prophet Muhammad. Although many Muslims have condemned the violence that has erupted around the world as a result of this video, I think James would agree that the one who posted the video

stepped out of line, for disrespectful words and images can have a powerful effect. Just because we have the freedom to say whatever we want does not mean we should say whatever we want.

Instead of focusing on how words can bring harm, James reminds us to see how words can bring healing, as one person discovered while playing with words.

Australian resident Georgie...met Beth...from Blue Springs, Missouri through a random Words With Friends game. Georgie’s husband Simon was experiencing some health problems, which Beth described to her husband Larry, who is a doctor.

Larry recognized the symptoms and urged Simon to go to a hospital, which turned out to be a last minute call, since Simon had a 99% blockage near his heart—an extremely serious condition.

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“Had Larry not sent that message I don’t think Simon would have gone to the doctor that day,” Beth said.

Three months later, Simon is alive and well and very thankful for that Words With Friends game. “I owe Larry everything...I’m really lucky to be here,” admits Simon.²

Words can bring healing to our lives, and sometimes we may not even recognize the value of them until they are missing. How we talk with one another even here in our church makes a difference in the world, even as far away as Lithuania. As I was chatting with Vyganté online this weekend, she once again asked about the church, for she misses all of you. She reflected upon her experience as she

has returned to her own congregation. She commented about all of you: “I miss them. I went to my church, and I really miss Crossroads. People in here are not so close. Not at all. You can tell them that I miss it, and they should value their congregation very much—they are all very close to each other, they communicate much more than church people do here.”

May you continue to keep the words flowing, using words with rudders to guide your life and to bring hope to others in this congregation, in your homes, neighborhoods, and jobs, knowing that words with rudders can ripple around the world, bringing hope to many.

¹ Homiletics, September 2012.

² Stan Schroeder, “Words with Friends Helps Save Man’s Life,” January 13, 2012, <http://mashable.com/2012/01/13/words-with-friends-saves-life/>