

Sermon 2 September 2018  
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In some ways the book of James is like Proverbs in the Old Testament. It is filled with practical, down-to-earth advice about how to live in any community—especially in a community of faith. Martin Luther was not a fan of James. The great reformer was so convicted of the *free grace* of God that he bristled at any teaching that suggested we could do anything to *earn* salvation. Luther wanted nothing to impede or compromise the truth of the gospel that we are saved by faith solely by the grace of God. We are saved by faith and not by works of the law—not by anything we do. *Only* grace, *only* faith, guided *only* by the scriptures—Luther was committed not to make the mistakes of the church he challenged.

James so bothered Luther that he even suggested it not be included in the canon of the New Testament. One of James's bold statements especially troubled Luther: *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Faith without works is dead.*

Luther was right to be concerned about the way James would be used in the church. It is a great temptation to return to the religion of laws and regulations. We have all experienced churches that proclaim we are saved by faith through free grace and then begin to judge its members and everyone else with a litmus test of words and actions. Christians in tobacco country like Virginia were told they could not be saved if they drank wine; Christians in Napa Valley were told they could not be saved if they smoked cigarettes.

It is hard for human beings to hold to Paul's radical teaching that God loves us unconditionally. We gravitate to judgment. Instinctively we feel humanity is incapable of living with such freedom. We need the law—God's love is not enough.

It is a profoundly difficult teaching of our faith—yet it remains the fundamental truth we trust. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the foundation of everything we believe. It is the solid ground we stand on—the only solid ground for the freedom we need to

become fully alive. We can *do* nothing to earn God's love—God's love is given.

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Is there then no place for what James has to say? Read the book and you will be able to answer that question for yourself. You will hear and literally *feel* the wisdom in its pages. James speaks to individuals who live in a community grounded on the gospel. What are some of the signs of the truth of our trust in God? What kind of good fruit does the good tree of the faithful life bear? In what ways does the Holy Spirit shape our lives together—the lives of those who are in Christ? Standing on the solid ground of the free, unconditional gift of God's love, we can hear James's words for what they are intended to be, for what they are to the listening soul—wise words of guidance for the ways we are to live in the world.

Listen again. Relax and listen. You may choose to close your eyes and listen. Listen again.

*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger: for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*

*Welcome with humility the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*

*You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.*

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep the world from contaminating us.*

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We live in a time when common grace is in short supply—when public civility is the exception rather than the rule. Who is quick to listen in our culture? Who is slow to speak? Who is slow to anger? James gives us a short list of the way we are to communicate with each other. He writes a catalog of basic behaviors for decent human beings—it is a catalog gathering dust on the shelves of our society. Listen to the

swift, cruel and cutting language of anger and its offspring misunderstanding and hatred. When did we begin to think it is okay to call another human being a dog or a group of people vermin? When did we decide those who disagree with us are not only mistaken, but wicked and corrupt? In too many ways we are becoming a small, angry, fearful and hateful country.

James says we need to *keep the world from contaminating* us. We also need to be intentional agents of civility in an uncivil society. Every thing we do or say contributes to the healing or the wounding of our world. God has implanted the Word in us—the word of courage and peace, respect and love—and that Word will save our souls—it will offer salvation to everyone we meet.

We are not victims of incivility or ugliness in our nation—we are agents of change, missionaries and ambassadors of God’s good will. Our faith in the sacred worth of every person needs to show—and needs—in its time—to be heard. The world will contaminate us, but in and through our faithfulness God can cleanse the world.

In many ways it begins here with the ways we treat one another. How well do we welcome the visitor or the stranger? We’ve talked about this many times before—but have we become better at taking the time and making the effort to be with people we do not know? It takes time to know one another. We need to make space and take the time to listen to the stories we have to tell.

I look out at your faces and realize I know so little about you. If I look carefully I see pews filled with unopened volumes of stories, experiences, joys and sorrows waiting to be read and heard. There is not enough time in my life to hear even a fraction of those stories, but every one I hear will enrich my life in immeasurable ways. We must learn to be quick to listen and slow to speak—to one another. *And* we need to take our anointed listening skill into the world. We need to speak our truths with courage and conviction. Our words should be like golden apples in silver bowls. We need to listen—we need to listen to our loved ones, to our friends, and to those who think we are their

enemies. In Christ, each of us is a gift to the world and each of us has a gift to give.

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This morning we celebrate Holy Communion, the most powerful act of communication the world has ever experienced. Paul cautions us not to take communion lightly.

*Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread  
and drink the cup.*

*For all who eat and drink without discerning the body,  
eat and drink judgment against themselves.*

*For this reason many of you are weak and ill,  
and some have died.*

(1 Corinthians 11:28-30)

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We fail to discern or recognize the body of Christ when we fail to know Christ is in each of us. We come to the table unburdened with grievances, willing to live at peace with one another and with every soul in the world. Jesus is here with us when we break the bread and share the cup—and here, in this act, we remember and reaffirm that he died for the world. Our community stretches to every corner of the globe, into every crack and crevice, embracing every man and woman, every child.

Jesus says, “*Remember me,*” and when we remember him, we are awakened from the amnesia of human race, from our spiritual amnesia. We live in a world that has forgotten who we are. More immediately, we live in a nation that has forgotten or is fast forgetting who we are. We have claimed certain values as essential to our character as Americans—truths that we have held to be self-evident. We aspire to believe that all people are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights.

We have never fully lived up to our high aspirations, but we have rarely discounted them so blatantly. This new society will contaminate us—if we do not learn the simple wisdom of James and the deep,

transformative wisdom of Christ. We must make the journey out of narrow and crippling self-concern into the expansive freedom of God's love in Christ. We must learn to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. We must learn and remember that Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. We must remember Jesus, and remember who we are as his brothers and sisters—for each other and for the world.