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Weekend of Sunday, September 19, 2021
17th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 25/Proper 20/Year B

First Reading: Jeremiah 11:18-20

Second Reading: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:30-37

Sermon Title: “James – Brother of Jesus, Apostle of Christ – Part 4”

Theme

The wisdom God gives unites our hearts and minds. Instead of living to satisfy our own wants and desires, we manifest this wisdom in peace, gentleness, mercy, and impartiality toward others.

Text – James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

^{4:1}Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ^{8a}Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Theme

Jesus’ teaching and action in this text are directed to the church whenever it is seduced by the world’s definition of greatness: prestige, power, influence, and money. The antidote to such a concern for greatness is servanthood.

Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

³⁰[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Introduction

I hope you are as fascinated with the story of James, the author of the Letter of James, as I am. Imagine being the half-brother to Jesus Christ!

Well, I am taking advantage of the opportunity to explore him, and his relationship with his big brother, and his ministry. For this and next week, the Second Readings are from the Letter of James. And I am learning right along with you.

As has been my pattern with sermon series, I will begin each week with some discovery into some issues about James, but then get into the actual passage from the Letter of James prescribed for the week.

The fourth issue we have to contend with is: The Ministry of James.

James Was a Humbled Witness

As I taught last week, even after more than two years of hearing about and perhaps witnessing the miracles of his big brother, Jesus, James remained a skeptic. We can imagine that it would be rather difficult to swallow the idea that the brother we had grown up with was really the Son of God. But the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:7) specifically named James as one to whom Jesus appeared after his Resurrection. Seeing his formerly dead brother walking and talking, James came to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God sent to save people from their sins. From that moment on, he became whole-heartedly devoted to serving him and his church.

Later, as a leader of the church, his leadership became a model of just, unifying, steadfast servant leadership. The Letter of James helps shape the mission of the Church: unity, faithfulness in prayer and witness, purity, perseverance under trial, and compassionate care for one another and the poor. James' life, ministry, and writings continue to transform hearts and minds today.

In his Letter of James, he introduced himself not as the brother of Jesus or a leader of the church but as simply, ^{1:1}James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

James Was a Wise Leader

When Paul visited Jerusalem, he met with two church elders: Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. When Paul described this event in Galatians (1:18-19), he referred to James as an apostle, one of a select few who had witnessed the risen Christ and whose teaching held authority.

James was still head of the church at Jerusalem fourteen years later when Paul returned to settle the issue of which Jewish laws apply to Gentile believers. Debate raged between the Judaizers, who demand that Gentile Christians be circumcised and observe all the laws God gave the Israelites, and Paul and Peter, who insisted that Gentiles didn't need to become Jews to follow Jesus (Acts 15:1-12). It's a thorny, complicated dispute that threatened to tear the infant Church in two.

James listened to both sides. He allowed them to fully express all their opinions, concerns, and arguments. Only after they stopped speaking did he respond, and his answer demonstrated his knowledge of the Scriptures, his discernment, and strong, impartial leadership.

The speech James gave in Acts (15:13-21) was simple, clear, and to the point. He endorsed Peter's testimony that God is redeeming Gentiles as well as Jews. He recited the prophet Amos (9:11-12) to show that this rescuing of the Gentiles is not in conflict with what scripture teaches but is rather a fulfillment of it. James then pronounced his judgment. There was no more debate. His authority and wisdom were respected, and his judgment was fair and beneficial to both parties. And aren't we glad James prevailed?

When recounting the story of the Jerusalem Council in Galatians (2:1-10), Paul described James as a pillar of the church, a man of high reputation.

James Was a Radical Advocate

It was a passion for James, who repeatedly demanded justice for the poor in the Letter of James. About a quarter of the book is devoted to advocating for and encouraging the needy, condemning favoritism based on wealth, and confronting the rich about their greed, apathy, exploitation, and foolish pride. The only other person in the New Testament who talked as much about social inequality is Jesus

himself. James not only urged compassion and care for the poor, but he also elevated and honored them.

James Was a Pastoral Peacemaker

The heart of a pastor beats in James' words as he exhorted his people to trust God regardless of their circumstances, to be faithful and pure, and to humbly submit to God. The Church at Jerusalem had experienced such intense persecution that most believers had fled to other cities. In this letter to those “scattered among the nations,” James comforted those who were suffering.

Unity in the church was a priority for James, as he repeatedly admonished Christians to stop judging each other, (2:12-13, 4:11-12) control their tongues and tempers, (1:19-20, 3:2-12), and set aside the envy and selfish ambition that causes disorder, conflict, and quarrels (3:14-4:2).

Throughout his ministry, James was a peacemaker. His leadership is a picture of James 3:17-18 lived out. “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

Sermon

Before we turn our attention to today's study of the prescribed passage, I would like to tell you a little of my own personal Christian history because it is pertinent to the sermon for today.

There has never been a time that I was not on the rolls of a Lutheran church. As a child, I was on the rolls of the church my parents selected for me, and attendance was never an option, even past confirmation.

During my high school years, I had a *spiritual awakening* that changed my life – remember it was the mid-1970's and the Jesus Movement was increasing all over the country. Over the years, as a cradle Lutheran, I have had to come up with ways to explain this *spiritual awakening*, because the more popular evangelical Christian culture seems to demand it. My awakening was not a *conversion experience*. I was

already a baptized child of God. That *spiritual awakening*, though powerful, was not the moment that I "got saved" – I was already "saved."

During those high school years, I was very involved in my Lutheran church, but also attended activities of other evangelical churches in the community – bible studies, and revivals, and stuff like that. Their more demonstrative, festive, spiritually invigorating style of worship and life appealed to me. Coincidentally, Carol, my future wife, knew and participated in some of those same events though we never met. After we met, in getting to know each other, we realized that we knew some of the same people in some of those same circles.

Carol and I met in the summer of 1980 at my home church when I was home from college as a work-study student. The Jesus Movement was waning and I was yearning for that feeling of God's active presence in my life again, so I arranged a gathering of some of those same young people I used to hang out with in the '70s and Carol showed up and that is how we met.

We were married shortly thereafter and my first job out of college was as an industrial engineer trainee at Parker Hannifin in Sebring. We lived in Alliance where we rejected the churches of our parents and sought out the kind of church we had both experienced in our high school days, an evangelical church where the Spirit's presence was more demonstrative, festive, and spiritually invigorating. We found such a church and made it our church home.

However, over time we realized how legalistic and judgemental the church was. Worship was every Sunday morning of course, but then Sunday evening and Wednesday evening. And in between times, it was expected that we only fellowshiped with other members of the church. We didn't speak in tongues or interpret so I at least, felt like a second-class citizen.

Carol and I were both college graduates and made pretty good money, and that was in stark contrast to the mostly blue-collar membership. Carol and I were then and always have been tithers – a full ten percent, before tax, tithers – that is what the church taught so that is what we did.

But over time, that legalism and judgmentalism wore us down, and when Parker Hannifin decided to close the Sebring plant and transfer us to Chicago, we were relieved. It got us out of that situation.

After that, we returned to the churches of our parents. We tried to be Methodists once, that was the church Carol grew up in, and that didn't fit. We tried the Lutheran church, and we found our home and have never looked back. Is the Lutheran church perfect? Heck no, there are now several divisions of Lutheranism and we don't even get along with each other.

So why did I take your time to tell you that bit of history that you didn't ask for? Because it is pertinent to what James wrote as our Second Reading for today.

Let me remind you that James wrote a Christian audience. In this passage, it seems like he was giving his readers a fire-and-brimstone sermon meant to bring sinners to conversion, but that is not it at all. His readers *were* Christians, just not very good ones, not very devoted ones, not very mature ones. They wanted to do what they wanted to do without any Christian discipline whatsoever. Sound familiar? I'll get back to this.

He began by asking "Who is wise and understanding among you?" It's a rhetorical question, please don't raise your hands. "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth." So, James, you say we need to do good works, but if those good works are performed without the proper spiritual attitude, they aren't any good? James' unanswered answer is yes, spiritual attitude matters.

Here James points out the difference between what might be called *wisdom from above* and *wisdom from below* and he challenged his readers with the question, *Which is guiding your Christian life?*

When we Christians behave with the wrong spiritual attitude, doing good works while seeking selfish ambition - think of politicians performing for a photo op - then we are operating out of *wisdom from below*. Another example would be, I coax you to show up for God's Work, Our Hands Day of Service, next Saturday from 9-Noon, and you come, but you are crabby about it all morning. Three hours

of Christian fellowship and being a good steward of God's creation and a free lunch were not attractive enough.

Wisdom from below ~ ^{15b}" earthly, unspiritual, devilish."

Wisdom from above ~ ^{13b}" works are done with gentleness born of wisdom,"
¹⁷"is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy"

The Letter of James suggests that you might as well stay home because James wrote that such wisdom is ^{15b}" earthly, unspiritual, devilish." I'd still miss you, but what could I do?

And on the contrary, James wrote that when ^{13b}" works are done with gentleness born of wisdom," and ¹⁷"is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" that is "wisdom from above."

I'll give you an example: last weekend Zion hosted a church family picnic. Many of you came and enjoyed the fellowship and food. The idea was Norma Roden's and then she recruited her friends, and I didn't see a grumpy face on any of them. Norma's idea was an example of "wisdom from above" and because they trust her, all her friends said, "Yes, count me in." Norma would have taken the help even if one of her helpers was grumpy about it, but they wouldn't stay grumpy for long – that is what happens when people with the right spiritual attitude get together.

James asked, ^{4:1}"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?" And then he proceeded to answer his own question. "Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts."

I'm not sure James' scenarios cover all conflicts and disputes, but I believe he is onto something. There is often an emptiness in the heart and soul of a person, Christian or not, and there is nothing that we can find that will fill it, though we try.

But James knew how to fill it! God revealed in Jesus Christ in our hearts and souls. James knew that the answer is not things or ambition or power or control. But to be

in a position to receive the good things of God we must be *spiritually mature*. Specifically, he wrote, ^{2b}"You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures."

So how do we ask rightly? James gave us that answer too. ⁷"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ^{8a}Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

It may sound like James' readers were in need of another conversion experience, but I would argue, that is not what is going on here. Too often *conversion* is seen as a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Turning to Christ is often thought of as a final answer, a conclusion. But that hasn't been my experience. The spiritual life for me has always ebbed and flowed – there were periods when I felt close to God, and periods when I could not find God. But neither period meant I was lost to God. James, and Luther I might add, agree that *conversion* is never complete, but more of a process. And this is where my story and the Letter of James converge.

There is within us, an ever-present tension between the way we know we should be, and the way we are, and the way of the world. And I further hope that you will all agree with me that the way we should want to be is to be like Christ.

That has not been my experience of the evangelical world. In the evangelical world, a person has a *conversion experience* sometimes a dramatic *conversion experience*. They "accept Jesus as their "personal" Lord and savior, and they can name the day they got "saved." "I got saved on July 14, 1975." Oftentimes after that, everything is good until it isn't, then they become a *backslider*, one who has returned to their previous bad habits or fallen away completely. Sometimes, when the backslider comes around, breaking from their sinful pattern, they need to be re-baptized, which scripture is opposed to.

My experience of life is more like that which James refers to. Not one conversion, but a daily conversion, because daily I have to ask myself if the godly path is the path I choose. It gets easier as I age and mature, but my commitment to the godly life remains slowly and painfully won through my many conversions.

I don't mean to disrespect the evangelical church. It is a lot more popular in our culture than the mainline denominations like Lutheranism. It works for a lot of people who need a spirituality that says the world is black and white, right and wrong, a scripture quotation for every problem. But that has not been my experience. My experience of life is that there is a lot of ambiguity in it. Maybe you can relate on any number of current subjects.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

When I read James from my Lutheran perspective, I hear him calling his readers to a more mature spirituality, that *wisdom from above* that I spoke of. James encouraged his readers to not accept easy answers, rules for this or that, but go deeper in prayer and meditation and seek the will of the Lord in all things. And trusting that our salvation is not at risk over our discernment of the will of God, sin boldly as Martin Luther said. Trust that our intentions to be Christ-like are indeed Christ-like and pleasing to God. This is my teaching for us today.

Prayer

Loving and merciful God, we give you thanks for your grace that comes to us through the cross of Christ. We readily acknowledge that we are sinners, today, tomorrow, and everyday till we see you face to face. Draw us in with your Spirit's tether so that we can discern your will in all we do, and then obey it. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen