

Sunday, October 4, 2020

James 1:17-27 (NRSV)

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. 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. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves[c] in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The book of James asks us to make choices about how we live our lives, and relate with one another. Perhaps a central question within this text is, are you a friend of God, or a friend of the world? A friend of God resists temptation, is self-disciplined and patient, treats everyone with impartiality, and acts as Scripture has taught. A friend of the world means living in conflict with God - envious, arrogant, acting favorably toward the rich, while ignoring the poor, having an outward display of a faith that is dead. Notice the details of everyday living - small gifts, generosity toward others, gestures and how we talk that builds community and the human condition.

Words are important because they reveal how we become motivated; how we form our intentions, beliefs and emotions, our inner thoughts. Words can alarm, harm, uplift, inspire, or degrade, or silence others.

Destructive words can poison our lives, and the lives of others, and will never throw light on God's presence, or open our own lives to what is truly good and right.

James reminds us that our actions speak louder than words. Through our actions, we can create and re-create ourselves in ways that are truthful and principled. James is calling us to take responsibility for how we choose to live and relate with others, to transform the world, to be a builder of the beloved community that God desires.

Questions to Ponder

- Are my words and actions helping to build the beloved community?
- Are there particular words and actions that I need to rid from my life?
What words and actions do I need to add to my life?
- How might these same questions be answered by our church community?

Prayer

God help me to silence words that might tear down, and to speak words that affirm others. Keep me away from acts that damage and destruct, and move me to act for the benefit of others that transforms. Help me to part of the realization of the beloved community. Amen.

Sunday, October 11, 2020

James 2:1-17 (NRSV)

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

We are called to be impartial and show no favoritism toward others whether they are rich or poor. Yet we live in a culture that drives us toward partiality - for political candidates, sports teams, business affairs and those with whom we socialize. Perhaps partiality reveals social order? James was really concerned with class distinctions baptized Christians might make in their faith communities. James found no place for class distinctions within a community formed in Christ's name.

Here's something all of us might have witnessed at one time or another. Someone comes to worship dressed in well-worn clothing, maybe hungry and thirsty, anxious for a word of hope, a gesture of welcome and kindness. A member approaches them and the person smiles, and then they're shown to back of the sanctuary, perhaps to a pew off-to-the-side to sit. Another person enters the sanctuary, well-clad in designer clothes. Greeters rush forward with their hands extended, uttering words of welcome and they are seated in a pew near the front, near the center aisle. Not really any different from this scripture reading. Class distinction, partiality, favoritism.

Christians must embrace and demonstrate the higher standard of *agape* or divine love, above any other kind of love. This is a love that initiates the radical call to unconditional justice wherever the economic gap between poverty and wealth is great. Can we live in a loving way if we ignore those who live in poverty? We are called to act. We must strive to find ways to create equity for all - stopping hunger, access to health care, a good standard of housing, fair pay with benefits. Through *agape* we unite in the in community as faithful of Christ, whether rich or poor, building God's kingdom in the here and now.

Questions to Ponder

- How am I showing agape or divine love for others?
- How can we work together here at North to avoid partiality and favoritism for others, avoid acting differently toward those who may be, who may be poor?

Prayer

Gracious and loving God your love knows no bounds, no partiality, no favoritism. Teach us how to love others like you. Amen.

Sunday, October 18, 2020

James 3:1-12 (NRSV)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who 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. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Taming the tongue, thinking before speaking, choosing our words carefully. James speaks words of caution for teachers, calling attention that they *will be judged with greater strictness*. Are teachers considered to be in a closer relationship with God, or do they have a greater mastery over doing wrong? Is it because their speech is more public than many others? Is there a greater authority implied?

In this text James is really talking about those who have modeled their faith for us. Were your parents who attended church, said grace before meals, taught you to pray at bedtime also teachers? Were your grandparents who told you stories about Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David and Deborah teachers? Is the woman that leads your Bible study also a teacher? Is the local cafe owner who provides meals to those in

need a teacher? Yes, they have all been our teachers. We are all teachers, and are always being taught. Teaching is a communal activity, and it is in the life of the community that we must lift our voices, always thinking before speaking, choosing our words carefully, modeling our faith.

Questions to Ponder

- How have I modeled and taught others about faith?
- Who are the voices of faith in our church community?

Prayer

God the great teacher of all, help us to be good teachers and models of faith, to understand the importance of words as we communicate with others. Amen.

Sunday, October 25, 2020

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a (NRSV)

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You 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. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

This text from James poses three questions for us as individuals, as well as, for Christian communities:

Who is wise and understanding among you? James doesn't name particular people, such as ministers or other church leadership. Rather there are particular characteristics that provide evidence of that wisdom - pure, gentle and humble, peaceable, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Think about people you know at North who might embody these characteristics.

What causes conflicts and disputes? Relationships, families and communities have disagreements. James attributes these conflicts and disputes to envy, wanting what someone else has. And this envy is a part of

the culture we live in. Kids want Nike LeBron James sneakers. Youth want the latest iPhones. Adults want to drive the best cars, live in the most desired neighborhoods and have prestigious jobs. All of these objects are desired with a belief they will bring happiness, self-worth, achievement, meaning for their lives. Church communities can be filled with envy as well. Sometimes we haven't prioritized programs that feed and clothe those in poverty, funded mission projects that would repair homes for those who have difficulty with maintenance.

What does God want? I believe God wants us as individuals and as church communities to yield to the wisdom of Godself and walk in the way of righteousness.

Questions to Ponder

- How can we as individuals reflect the wisdom of God, and avoid the wisdom of the world?
- How can we as individuals avoid the conflicts and disputes fueled by envy and supported by the world?
- How well does our church community reflect the wisdom of God, and avoid envy?

Prayer

God fill our hearts and minds with your wisdom. Help us to avoid what the world may teach that leads to disagreements. Lead us to be teachers and models of faith. Amen.