

Sermon, 4-29-18***The Path*, Chapter 23; James 1:17-27**

Today we finish our multi-month journey through *The Path*. Though our focus on James is in chapter 23 and we have one more chapter to go, the next few weeks will include guest speakers and special days like Pentecost which will make it hard to finish the last chapter on Revelation. So we are each responsible for reading and reflecting on that last chapter.

Today, though, and hopefully this week, we focus on the letter of James. Depending on which scholar you read this letter may be one of the earliest or latest works of the New Testament. But for our purposes, that determination is not critical. James is often seen as a contrasting voice to the Apostle Paul whom we considered last Sunday. But again for our purposes, we do not need to dwell on those debates.

Instead, I have chosen one passage from the letter of James that provides us with a window to see what James saw, what he taught, and what he eventually died for—how God connects with us and calls us to new life based on what God has done for us as the generous creator who seeks our good and wants us to seek good for others.

God connects with us through words. Not through empty words or sordid words or even religious words, but the words that come from the very heart and mind of God. James calls this “the word of truth” and describes that connection from God to us as a type of childbirth. This view of God as a mother giving birth may surprise some of us; here James gives us one of the most powerful feminine images of God in the New Testament.

The word of truth with which God births us is so much more than religious language. God’s truth involves at least three things—first, the way things **are** based on what we can discern in reality; second, the response God commands (and that James explores later in this letter)—a response of active, faithful, **true** compassion that cares for those in need; and third, the truth of God’s intention, God’s deepest desire for us, that God giving birth to us reveals.

So James tell us we are to honor and pay attention to God’s word of truth. We can discern this truth in different ways—keeping up with the news; reading and praying Scripture; and being in relationship with people who can help educate us on what we don’t know because of the limits of our education, our experiences, and our interests.

In order for us to happen, James gives us three commands. They seem like common sense wisdom, but they involve a deeper sense of how we can better engage reality as it is and grow in faith as God intends. Here they are in sequence:

- Let everyone be quick to listen...
- Slow to speak...
- Slow to anger.

I think most of us see the wisdom these words offer. Rarely do we get in trouble by listening more and talking less in our lives. And anger, in most cases, becomes a barrier to hearing what others have to say, much less what God is saying to us. We can think of anger as earplugs that keep us from hearing what others can tell us.

But we cannot follow these commands without God's help. James is clear that God is generous and glad to help us. You see, God has implanted the word in each of us that can save our souls. This word can grow over time like a seed in the ground or an embryo in the womb. Our part is to do what we can with God's help to help that word grow and bear fruit in our lives.

Ironically, in order to make that word from God grow, we need to talk about it less. That is hard for a preacher to realize. Of course, there is a time and place for preaching and teaching and conversation. But ultimately there are two things that help God's implanted word bear fruit in our lives and for the world: contemplation and action.

James is clear that we can talk and talk about things—even important things—and not change ourselves or bring change to our world. We see that in simple everyday things. How often have we tried to change a habit and failed? It is usually not from lack of talking about it. We may read articles, talk to friends, come up with plans, and try and try-- yet fail. But when we talk less and do more—even simple actions done consistently—we see amazing progress.

Or consider politics. How often do we complain about politicians? We may watch cable news or listen to talk radio and talk back to them (or maybe yell back at them). We may voice our complaints with likeminded friends. We can go on and on with our words—and nothing changes except that we may get more and more disillusioned or even angry. But if we pick an issue and learn about it from careful research and listening to people who know and people who are hurt because of the issue; pray; and then take action, no matter how small—writing letters, protesting, lobbying, voting—then change may come to our politics and to our souls.

We need to replace so much talking with a righteous reinforcing loop—first, listening to, studying, and praying God's word of truth-- current reality, needed compassion, and God's intention. That is contemplation in its best sense. Second, do something about what we learn so that we participate in God's intention for the world. Our best intentions do not matter unless we do something to help. If we fail to remember God's best and do our part, then James says we are just deceiving ourselves.

According to James, here is how we know if we are on the right track:

The first indication is if we know how to manage what we say; or as James describes it, how to “bridle our tongues.” Now for those of us who are talkative, this does not mean you have to change your personality. I know people who talk very little who can do great damage in the few words they do say—caustic comments that cut people to the quick. Some of us who do tend to talk more can learn when to be quiet and listen. So James' injunction is about learning a godly practice of listening, not about changing our personality.

The second indication is if we care for people that need our help. James, consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures, specifies people like widows and orphans; but really our help is to be given to anyone in distress. In our world today, that includes people with addiction; or with mental health issues; or those that endure discrimination because they are different from the majority. Words may get us started, but our faithful actions over time are what matter.

Today, after the Fish Fry and Kite Flying Day, Mother Bonnie and I are going to Sewanee for a few days to learn about this intersection of contemplation and action. We will study the works of Howard Thurman and be with people who can help us gaze into the word that God has implanted in our souls. As priests—as teachers and preachers—it is natural and even needed for us to come back and talk about what we learn. But the highest good will be how we live what we learn in how we pray and what we do as examples. Please pray for us.

Because how we pray and what we do as a community of faith matters. It encourages us in our faith—and it helps us to inspire and even attract others as we grow in faith together. Practically we continue to learn how this might look through our ABCD interviews within the congregation and in our wider community. With God’s help and direction, we want to learn how we can work together based on our shared gifts to produce something unexpected and beautiful that honors God and helps all of God’s people.

How we pray and what we do may help us to face some things that are hard for us—like how to acknowledge our past as part of the healing we need for our shared future. Whatever we do, James told us why we do it:

“In fulfillment of God’s own purpose God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (James 1:18).

Amen.