

Sunday, September 22, 2024

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The Epistle: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

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.

The Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for 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." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

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

Sermon, Sept 22, 2024

When it comes to following Jesus, I am so up and down. Sometimes, my faith is alive and it feels great... I know God is real. I am motivated to engage fully with Church and to pray...and I feel full of the Spirit and want to share God's love with others. I'm all in for Jesus; I'm all committed, I'm like full steam ahead, let's go! And my heart is full of love of care for others – Let's go change the world!

And then other times, I feel like the Grinch, complaining about life's frustrations – and I'm not talking about the big frustrations, I'm just talking about the annoying things that happen – I misplace my keys and I'm late. I spill coffee on my freshly washed shirt. I get cut off on the road while driving. And if and when I think about God in any of these moments, I complain to Him – why oh why can't you just let things go smoothly! C'mon Jesus!

When it comes to other people – I don't say such nice things in the car when I'm cut off, I'm not especially nice when I'm late and my flight is delayed, I'm not overly friendly and kind when I feel like the Grinch inside.

I'm sure none of you are like this, it's just me, right?

In the Bible, we are regularly challenged to live out our faith by loving and serving others – like Jesus' words in the Gospel reading: *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."*

And as a church community, we are called to be a community of peace – like what James talks about in our epistle reading: *"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."*

There are moments when this all feels so attainable – when, maybe, we are not stressed out and behind, with space and time to think about how to extend love and service to others, to take extra measures to reach out to those around us in need.

And then... well, there are other moments when under pressure or feeling depressed or overwhelmed, when we get tunnel vision and all we can see is our own needs, problems, and desires. And the courage and capacity to put aside our needs and wants for the sake of others is not at all in view anymore.

I think it's easy for me to just resign myself and think – well, such is life. This is the reality of our lives today. This sermon has caused me to consider – have we settled for too little?

Throughout Church history, there have been both good and bad times, both incredible moments of love and courage and also, horrible moments of hatred and abuse. I don't want

to dismiss and ignore the bad times. But I want to highlight some incredible realities of courageous love.

In the early centuries of the Church, devastating plagues broke out in various places killing thousands. And during these plagues, it was noted how everyone was fleeing places of death – trying to escape the plague – everyone except Christians. Christians stayed to care for the sick and dying, many themselves dying in the process.

Christians showing courageous love. What about us?

Many have heard the stories of Christians risking it all to hide and rescue Jews during the rise of Nazi Germany. Danish Christian, Corrie Ten Boom and her entire family were actively hiding Jews, helping them escape from the Nazis. But then, they got caught – all of them, Corrie's parents and siblings. And so the entire family was carted off to Concentration Camps. Corrie was the only one to survive.

Christians showing courageous love. What about us?

The early Church stood out among other groups because people in churches came together across barriers of intense divisions of hatred and prejudice - both rich and poor, both Jew and Gentile, those in power with those struggling under the weight of oppression. It might be like having a community full of both arch conservative Republicans and progressive Democrats, with both Jews and Iranians, Jewish soldiers in community with Hamas and Hezbollah soldiers, both Jews and Palestinians, both Ukrainian and Russian soldiers. Basically, take all of the barriers that divide people in the world, put people from opposing sides together in loving community.

Christians showing courageous love.

And what's more, when the Church lives out this kind of love, it embodies how God meant for human beings to live. It becomes a model of what God intends for us. Can you imagine if this kind of love spread and became normative for societies and cultures in our world?

That's what Christ calls His Church to be about. And yet... here we sit in the reality of life today. There is something desperately wrong with the human condition. A newspaper asked the question, "what is wrong with the world." So Catholic writer, GK Chesterton wrote in a simple answer. The question what is wrong with the world? "Dear Sirs. I am."

Now for some Christians, the response has been to just try harder – just try harder to love. But that is the problem isn't it? No matter how hard we try, we can't seem to escape our inconsistencies, our selfishness and pride, our propensity to focus only on what we want at the expense of others. I think this is like giving a person a phone or a computer without any way to tap into a power source. That's one of the worst things as a kid – when, at Christmas, you get a cool toy only to find out that it didn't come with batteries.

Some think Christianity is all about a moral ethic – to love others. While this is a key aspect of the Christian faith, at the heart of the matter is something more.

It's telling that in our Gospel reading, Jesus' call to serve others follows on the heels of Him just having just told His disciples that He is heading to the cross: *"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."*

Jesus' death and resurrection is at the center of our faith. Jesus didn't die so that we could try harder. Jesus' death and resurrection happened in order to transform us who believe.

Prior to Jesus, the biblical story is about human beings trying to live out God's call on them to be people of love and light. But on their own, they keep veering off course, getting caught up by their own self-centered concerns and pride. It's like living life without a power source, without batteries. The capacity to follow God and love others is inadequate.

And so God comes to us in the Person of His Son, Jesus, to change everything. Jesus walks the path we humans were supposed to live – one of loving obedience to the Father, and sacrificial love for others. And in his faithfulness, he conquers the power of sin and death that infects all of us and rises to a new, incorruptible life in His resurrection. And then all of us are then invited to follow Him in faith. That's what baptism is about. Traditionally it was about full immersion and not the little splashing of water on people's heads like we Episcopalians do it. We go under the water, die to our old life, and then we come back up out of the water, united with Jesus in his resurrection into His new life. The Bible talks about how the Risen Jesus is the New Adam, the beginning of a new humanity. It's like when we are baptized, we are dying to the old humanity – the old way of being human and rising again with Jesus into a new creation. Where the old humanity was in bondage to sin and death, we rise into a new life where, with Jesus, we can conquer the power of sin and death. And so, the journey of the Christian life is about letting the Spirit of God recreate and transform us from within to be – this new humanity, to be who God intended, people of love, people of light in a dark world, people that can change the world by how we love others.

But this means, not try harder, but opening ourselves up to the Spirit of God to do God's work in us. That's why James says at the end of our epistle reading: *"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."*

How can you open yourself up to the Spirit of God and allow the Spirit to change and transform you from the inside out? Today's life can be maddening in its pace and busyness. For some of us, it can feel like we are treading water to just stay afloat with responsibilities, deadlines, and concerns. And it can feel crazy to add more things to do in an already jam packed schedule. But could it be like what Jesus said in last week's Gospel reading? What will it profit to gain the world and lose your life?

Sometimes I think we settle for too little. It's like a common mantra – “God accepts you just the way you are.” Stanley Hauerwas, well known theologian at Duke, was interviewed and he said, *“No! No! I don't want God to accept me the way that I am. I want God to transform me, to make me perfect...I don't believe in the “you are accepted” ideology. It is a way of our escaping the necessity of judgment on ourselves and a way to ensure we will have shallow souls.”*

Let's not end up having shallow souls, shriveled souls without life giving infusions of grace from Jesus that give us the capacity to love the way God wants us to love.