

The lectionary spends the next five weeks with combinations of Wisdom literature from the Hebrew Scriptures, stories of Jesus from the Gospel according to Mark and, as the epistle reading, selections from the Book of James. I'm going to focus primarily for that period on the readings from James, although I'll certainly be making reference to the other readings as well. Since we've just spent a fair amount of time with one of Paul's letters, this will allow us to explore the question of tension between the Pauline and Jacobean strands of Christian thought. I'm also looking forward to the next few weeks because I've always had a soft spot for the Book of James. Maybe that's because the practical nature of the book appeals to me – I love to theorize but at some point I've got to put what I think I know into action or I get antsy. Or it may just be because I've heard some pretty good teaching and preaching out of this book over the years. Regardless of my motivations, I hope you'll indulge me for the next few weeks and maybe we'll find some things that we can use in this oft-neglected epistle.

Tradition tells us that this book was written by James, the brother of Christ, whom Paul called a "pillar of the Church." Although the gospels tell us that he was not initially a follower of his brother and was opposed to his ministry, he was converted to the Way of Jesus either late in his brother's life or possibly after the resurrection; Paul also mentions that the Risen Christ appeared to James. He was known in the church as James the Just and as a result of his piety, his relationship to Jesus and probably his leadership skills, he became the leader of the Church in Jerusalem after Peter's departure for the mission field. He was tried, convicted and executed by stoning by the Sanhedrin during a period in Judæa when no Roman Procurator was present, shortly before the eruption of the great Jewish revolt against the Romans and the destruction of the Temple.

Over the centuries, many preachers and teachers have sought to set up a rivalry between Paul and James over the proper relationship between faith, works and salvation. That eminent disciple of Paul, Martin Luther called the book of James an epistle of straw. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul reported tension over the question of circumcision between himself and some who "came from" James but it is certainly possible to read this passage as Paul being careful to separate his antagonists from James himself. Paul is certainly not shy about taking on Peter directly over Gentiles and the Law, as he does in the same letter. Indeed, Paul's other references to James and Luke's reportage of the encounters between the two leaders in Acts would seem to portray a mutually respectful relationship. As to the theological differences in their writings, well, let's see what we can uncover over the next few weeks.

In following the lectionary this morning, I'm jumping into the middle of the first chapter of James with some regret. There are some deeply meaningful verses in the first part of the chapter that I hope to come back to some other time. I encourage you to read them later if you have not done so lately. I'm also following the lectionary's lead in picking up in the middle of what many editions of the book and many commentators show as a paragraph. There's a lot of variation in opinion on this. The letter of James is addressed "to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," in other words to Jewish believers, and it owes a great deal to the forms of writing found in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the books of Wisdom. Those of us who've been studying Proverbs on Wednesday nights will be able to see similarities and there are also clear parallels with some of the Psalms, such as this morning's Call to Worship, Psalm 15. A cursory reading of James appears to show a book full of disconnected nuggets of advice, rather like the book of Proverbs,

and scholars have struggled to find the underlying structure of the book. This may be one of the reasons James is preached from less often than Paul, whose more structured arguments lend themselves more easily to three points and a funny story. This morning's passage, though, seems to me to cohere around the idea of doers of the word.

James begins his call to believers to follow an active faith with a reminder of their motivation. As Stephen Schwartz wrote for his rock musical, Godspell, "All good gifts around us come down from Heaven above." Certainly the idea of God's provision for us is one that we celebrate every week in our prayers of thanksgiving and in our hymns, like this morning's "I Was There to Hear Your Morning Cry." James' words in the old King James Version are "from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." This last phrase will be familiar to us from that old favorite, "Great is Thy Faithfulness" but we may have lost sight of its meaning. Remember, the stated audience for James' writing, "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," would have been living in a Roman world, where good gifts were believed to come from the rather fickle favor of many gods. The Roman gods were changeable indeed, with favorites, jealousies and capricious behavior that were far more human than divine. Bound up with this idea of the gods' responsibility for the ever-shifting fortunes of their adherents was the Romans' use of their gods' names for the wandering lights in the sky, the ones that seemed to follow no fixed course as did the stars and that were often cast into shadow by one another. We still use Anglicized Latin names for most of them today -- Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and so on -- and we understand better what causes the shadows of turning we term eclipses. James is reminding his readers that we owe all the good in our lives not to some conjunction of stars and planets but to the one who made the stars and planets, the Father of lights, whose love and favor are steadfast and everlasting. We are at the mercy neither of uncaring godlings nor an unknowing universe. We need not, like the poet A. E. Housman, cry out, "I, a stranger and afraid, In a world I never made." In an echo of what the Gospel of John records as his brother's teaching, James reminds us that we have been born of our Mother God and the word of truth to be the first fruits of God's creation. As first fruits, we may hold pride of place in creation but we must also remember that for the Jews, first fruits of any harvest were always dedicated to the Lord.

Our gratitude to God for the good gifts we have in life and for our status as God's children should impact our relationships with each other. We are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in "The Message," "Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear." As I read these words this week, I couldn't help but think of James' so-called rival, Paul and his letter to the Ephesians. This sounds an awful lot to me like being subject to one another, putting others' needs, opinions and wisdom before our own. To be angry with someone automatically presumes that they have failed to live up to our standards or expectations of them -- we put ourselves in a position of judging superiority to them. If we hold our anger and our tongues, we might learn something. As Abraham Lincoln said, "Better to keep silent and be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt." Some of you may have read in the Times sports section this week about the relationship between the Mariners' two Japanese players, Ichiro Suzuki and Kenji Johjima. The article by Brad Lefton explored the traditional Japanese relationship of *sempai* and *kohai*, elder and youngster or teacher and disciple. Lefton writes, "The kohai is expected to be respectfully deferential and ever cautious of not offending his sempai with behavior that could be interpreted as rude or aggressive. Society discourages kohai from initiating things such as a

simple invitation to get together or being presumptuous enough to take a seat next to a sempai without invitation.” Perhaps if he had been writing to Japanese believers rather than Jewish believers, James would have advised them to treat one another as sempai, with great respect for each other’s ideas and personal boundaries.

As I read articles and commentaries on this passage this week, I also couldn’t help but reflect on the danger of anger in James’ world and in ours. On Wednesday night this past week, in our study of Proverbs, we talked about the damage unleashed anger can do to our relationships but of course it can go beyond that. James, in mid-first century Palestine, lived in a powder keg, where factional anger seethed between Sadducees and Pharisees, Zealots and Hellenists. A quarrel could easily become a fight, a brawl, a riot, which would bring down the wrath of the Roman occupying force with deadly results. Just as easily today, angry words can lead to a gun. If those words are between leaders, they can lead to bombs and mines. If those angry words come from certain mouths and fall on certain ears, they can lead to suicide bombs and atrocities. Indeed, we do well to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. Unrestrained human anger does not serve God’s purposes. God’s purposes are all about restoration of relationships between human beings and each other and between human beings and God.

It’s an easy mark for a preacher or teacher to read “rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” and to immediately set about upbraiding his or her hearers for sexual licentiousness, gambling, drinking, smoking, chewing, dancing, going to the picture show or whatever social sin is the current hot topic. But coming hard on the heels of his words about anger and the importance of hearing rather than talking, I think James had something different, something deeper in mind. The failure to listen to others, the undisciplined tongue and the free rein of anger betray a self-centeredness that is at the root of much destructive behavior. James’ language here also reminds me of Jesus’ parable of the sower, in which some seeds fall among thorns, a rank growth, which grow up and choke them. If we are too involved in the cares of the world and delight in riches, which Jesus told his disciples were represented by the thorns, then our selfish desires prevent what James calls our proper openhearted welcoming of the seed of the implanted word that has the power to save our souls.

To truly welcome that word of truth is to take into our very being the Spirit of Jesus, the Word, the *λογος*, who said that he was the truth. To welcome the word, James tells us, means not just to hear it and to nod our assent but to do the word, to put into practice the teachings of Jesus, letting that Holy Spirit guide our everyday actions. If we are truly grateful to God for all good gifts, then we will be grateful enough to do something in response to God’s calling. If we fail to do this, we are deceiving ourselves about our response. A purely intellectual, hypothetical faith has no impact on our lives. Only when we practice what we preach do we demonstrate the truth of our faith. I mentioned earlier the connection between James’ writing and the Scriptural books of Wisdom he must surely have studied. In his introduction to James in “The Message,” Eugene Peterson writes, “Wisdom is not primarily knowing the truth, although it certainly includes that; it is skill in living. For what good is a truth if we don’t know how to live it?” According to the Australian theologian, William Loader, in his comments on this passage, wisdom, according to James, is “knowing how to live the way God wants us to live.”

Like his older brother Jesus (or, if you're Catholic, his younger step-brother Jesus), James is a dab hand with a good metaphor or parable. Anyone who is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he says, is like someone who looks in a mirror, sees him or herself, and then goes away and forgets what they look like. Like any good metaphor, this calls to mind a couple of streams of thought. As we hear this, we may think of the one who looks into a mirror, sees dirt on their face, then immediately forgets about it and walks around all day with a dirty face. If we fail to put into practice the word of life from God, then we only walk around with our failings on us for all to see. Only in living the word do we present a beautiful countenance to the Lord and to the world. Alternatively, when we look into a mirror and see ourselves, we should always remember that we are seeing the image of God, for we are made in God's image. When we go out into the world and forget that we are God's image, forget to do the word, then we may take upon ourselves a far different image altogether, an image of hate and cruelty and self-interest. Our lives can be conformed very easily to the image we present to the world. I love the short story by Max Beerbohm called "The Happy Hypocrite." The story tells of a rake named Lord George Hell. In the midst of his dissolute life, he encounters a pure young woman and falls completely in love. He attempts to woo her but she is repulsed by his evil appearance, for his face is twisted with his life of crimes and misbehaviors, and tells him she will only have a man with the face of a saint. Lord George Hell disguises himself with a mask of a handsome and innocent face and successfully courts her under the name of Lord George Heaven, reforming his behavior to ensure winning the young woman. They marry and, out of love for her, George commits himself to a morally upright life, repaying those he has cheated and giving the bulk of his misbegotten fortune to charity. When his past catches up with him in the form of a discarded lover and he is forced to remove his mask, he is astounded to find that his face now matches not only the mask he wore but also his new life of love and selflessness. He and his true love live happily ever after. When we look into our spiritual mirrors, we are to see in ourselves the image of God and to live our lives to honor that image.

Does anyone here think they are religious? Religious and religion have become rather dirty words for many. They invoke an unthinking adherence to a set of rules rather than a relationship with the living God. But James uses the word in quite the opposite manner. For James, religion is faith in action. It is not, as philosopher Alfred North Whitehead defined religion, "what man does with his solitariness." For James, religion is how we live in community with God and humankind. Richard Holloway calls it "the celebration of God and the discovery of his will for our lives."

So as we pursue James' kind of religion, we are reminded once again of the danger of the unbridled tongue. Again, this is a direct link between James and the Wisdom literature to which his work is often compared. Look in your bulletins again at our Call to Worship, Psalm 15. Who has the right to live on Yahweh's holy mountain, in the presence of the Living God? "Those who speak truth from their heart, whose tongue is not used for slander." A few verses later, the Psalm continues enumerating the virtues of the righteous, "Who stand by a pledge at all cost, who do not ask interest on loans, and cannot be bribed to exploit the innocent." James recasts this as "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." Again, I want to make the connection here between what James sees as the stain of the world and improper treatment of others, in this case the ones his brother termed "the least of these." As William

Loader puts it, "Keeping oneself undirtied from the world is not about avoiding engagement where we get our hands dirty. It is about refusing to surrender to the dominant values of society, even when they are called "Christian". In the context of James this relates especially to wealth and to the way we treat people." Commentator after commentator on James remarks on the deep concern that this "pillar of the church" has for the poor. It is, they point out, not only reflective of a man who has come to deeply believe in Jesus' call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick and visit the prisoner but also of the core of the teachings of the prophets and, indeed, of the Law of Moses itself. Time and time again, the Torah and its prophets remind God's Chosen that they are to care for widows and orphans and strangers, for all of those who are helpless and without advocates. Why? Because as Jesus and Torah agree, the heart of the Good News and the heart of God's true law are the same: to love God with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The values of our world tell us to maximize our profits without regard to those around us in need. The values of our Lord tell us to give what is ours to the needy, without bothering to count the cost.

To keep ourselves unstained by the world means no less than committing our lives, each moment of each day, our hands, our feet, our voices, our wealth, our minds, our wills, everything to be consecrated, to be dedicated to God, to the service of God and God's people. Will we fully attain James' call, fully live up to the words we sang just minutes ago? Will we ever completely be doers of the word? No. But as James also writes in chapter one of his book, "God gives to all, generously and without reproach." God has given birth to us, James writes; we are God's first fruits. Despite our failings, there is love and, as Paul wrote to the Romans, no condemnation for us in God. We should not deceive ourselves; we should face up to our failings, look in the mirror and see the smudge that needs to be attended to. But we can do so in the confidence that we will also see in that mirror the very image of God shining in us, that we are God's beloved children and that we are invited, as a beloved community, to God's table.