

Sermon August 31st

When Pastor Jon asked me to preach on these lessons, I was thrilled when I read them. James 1:19 is one of my favorite Bible verses. Brothers and sisters, be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. I found it years ago and have held it in my heart. I have been told I am a truth teller, by some. But I have a feeling I didn't and don't always do that with the necessary tenderness required.

Thank God I am maturing a bit. Inappropriate words and thoughts still come into my mind and out of my mouth. The people who know me best are easily shocked only because they do know my heart and the beliefs I hold dear. Yet, here I stand.

As I was reading commentaries about this passage, I was struck with some new understanding. I think it's easy to take part of a verse that speaks to you and make it yours, but upon learning more it holds new meaning and new value.

For the writer of James, it's the faith that is active or operative on a daily basis that is important. James claims that faith that is not active is not really faith at all.

Martin Luther struggled with this book. For him, it didn't belong among the other books, especially along with the Gospels and the letters from Paul. Paul was about justification through faith. To many, the book of James sounds like he is promoting works righteousness. And if taken as a single book, perhaps it does sound like that.

This text calls us, as believers, to have a whole-hearted, consistent devotion to God. James feels we are required to live our faith out loud because of the gifts we have been given by God. He says, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights". And he talks directly to us about the language we use. Language is a gift. How do we speak to others, about others? Martin Luther explains the commandment to not bear false witness against our neighbor when he says...

What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.

That's faith in action. Faith informed action

As I grow into my faith, it's something I work really hard on. Even my actions in my car. When I become frustrated, I try really hard not to mouth inappropriate words, make actions with my hands or to even look angry. We all do things in vehicles with no bad intentions, why should I assume they had intended to cause me anger? And I am always trying to remember, that person may very well walk

through our church doors next week and still have that image of me in their heads.

For James, we serve others, we love others because we have no other choice as we proclaim to be Christian, as we proclaim the word of God. In his understanding, you can't do one without the other. I get that. That speaks to my heart.

When we hear the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is pretty critical of the Pharisees and scribes. They asked him a question about the habits and traditions of the disciples. They are concerned that some of the disciples are not following the traditions of the forefathers. Note that some did wash their hands, but some didn't. These elders understand that they are called by God to uphold the laws of the people. They know that all Jewish people are called by God. According to Elisabeth Johnson's commentary, the traditions were seen as a way to "build a fence around the law," to preserve the Jewish faith and way of life, especially in the midst of Roman occupation.

The Jewish faith carries with it a great many rules and regulations around food, but also many other things. Traditions in and of themselves can be such beautiful things. They can define who we are. There are many traditions that we keep in our family that wouldn't make sense in others. The tradition here isn't in question, it's actually a good tradition. Wash your hands, wash your food before eating. The Jewish people try to uphold these traditions as a way to protect the faith.

Jesus refers to Isaiah. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines". He speaks of the people following God with words but not actions. There is something the Pharisees were doing. It was called Corban. It was a practice where they willed their assets to the temple after their death, instead of to their parents. Jesus saw this as a way of dishonoring their parents. Thereby breaking the commandment to honor your mother and father. He was calling them out about that.

We all make choices. How do we make choices to uplift our faith? What traditions do we hold that keep us from God? Perhaps, an angry heart, judgment of others, or desiring something far too much. Which traditions bind us to God? How do we live out our faith? Do we address others with kindness and understanding? Are we helping the marginalized, the dis-enfranchised people of society? Do we love the people in our lives, just as they are?

Both the reading from James and the Gospel in Mark are encouraging us to be doers of the word, to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Martin Luther said “God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does.” Go, be doers of the word in all you do. Today and always.