

Ordinary Time - Year B

## Doers of the Word

The Epistle of James provides us the spark we need for this late summer series that gets us ready for the launch of fall programming. Many churches shift into a higher gear once the community's schools have started up again. James gives us a chance to reflect on the nature of Christian service and how we can continue our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by engaging with our wider community in acts of service. One thing that is clear from current sociological research is that while there are many who question the institution of the church, getting involved in providing real help to better our neighborhoods and to lift up the individuals and families within them is an easy entry into the worship life of the church. James asks us to maintain an outward focus, even when we gather for worship. We invite you to engage with this epistle as we seek to be doers of the word.

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Avoiding Anger**

**August 29, 2021 – [James 1:17-27](#)**

**Color: Green**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Our series begins here on the last Sunday in August. Many schools have been in session for a while; others wait for the Labor Day weekend next week. But on the brink of that immersion into learning and community exercise, we focus on being doers of the word. As you can see in the preaching notes, this isn't about works righteousness, but about living out the salvation we have received by grace through faith. In part, we are asking in this series, "You've been saved or claimed by Christ, so what? How will your life be different, look different, act different because of that primary relationship? What influence does faith have on your actions?" In one sense, we are still the same – human, fallible, sinful. But in another sense, we are new creations, ready to embrace a new reality of living. Whether we've done this now for years or whether we are newly minted

followers of Jesus, we continually ask ourselves how is it with our souls and with our living these days.

While anger might not be the center of this text, it is one of those distractions that often keeps us from being doers of the word. Throughout this series, we are reflecting on how well we are living in community. We need to look at our relationships within the body: How do we value one another? Who is being neglected or left out of the decision-making process within the church? We are also examining how we relate to the wider community around us.

Consequently, our worship is focused on relationships, prayers of healing of broken covenants, confession of letting our anger get in the way of service, and prayers of intercession for those who are suffering in our communities. How do we open ourselves to the world around us in ways that impact our communities for the better?

Again, there are opportunities as we worship to lift up the various ministries of the church. It is good to encourage being doers of the word as we worship together, but it is better to provide outlets for that doing by gathering with others in service.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

“Like those who look at themselves in a mirror” (1:23). James is an odd duck, don’t you think? Well, Martin Luther thought James was dangerous stuff. He thought that James was an “epistle of straw” because of all this hearing and doing stuff. See, Luther was afraid that we would read the Letter of James and come away with the feeling that it was all about doing, that our faith consisted of acts like caring for widows and orphans in their distress, that our calling was to keep ourselves unstained from the world – meaning that we live purely, keep our promises, respect one another, learn to live in community, guard our emotions, and turn away from that which would deceive us. Luther thought that was bad.

Well, no, to be honest Luther didn’t think that was bad. Forgive me, those who might have strains of Lutheran history in their bloodstreams. Of course, I know that Luther was all for any and all of those acts of faith. He did them himself on a

regular basis. No, it wasn't the acts that worried Luther; it was the belief that the acts were what saved people.

Frankly, Luther's perception made me wonder if he had read the letter in the first place. I mean, this is just chapter one, and here we have it in black and white: The implanted word that has the power to save your souls. The implanted word? What in the world? Or beyond the world?

James, tradition has it, was the brother of Jesus. There is some considerable doubt as to whether that James ever sat down and wrote this letter, but in the book of Acts, we see James stepping up to be a leader—some say The Leader—of the fledgling church. So, I like to imagine that this letter is the result of being the brother of Jesus and of listening to all that Jesus was saying his whole life, not just during the three years of ministry the Gospels tell us about. His whole life, well, James' s whole life anyway, since he was the younger brother. For James's whole life, he lived in that shadow. Maybe there was a time when James idolized his big brother Jesus, as is the habit of younger brothers. Maybe there was a time when James began to resent Jesus and the special treatment Jesus received from his mother, who treated him as though he was a special gift from God, and from his father, who seemed strangely in awe of his eldest son. Maybe James grumbled about the things Jesus would say and about how his sisters and all the neighborhood kids would flock to listen to every word Jesus said, as though he were some prophet or teacher, for heaven's sake! There was that scene in three of the gospels where it says Jesus' mother and his brothers came to "see him." You know, James was leading the pack and telling them that Jesus had gone crazy, and they needed to get him help, take him someplace where he wouldn't be an embarrassment to the whole family.

James was a doer. James was faithful. In Jesus' story, James got to be the elder brother, but he didn't come off very well (see Luke 15). Now it had all changed. James looked in the mirror and didn't like what he saw. So, when the resurrected Jesus showed up and said, "I need you, bud," James the doer stepped up. If you asked him, he probably couldn't have told you why. He just did. He just did what he always did. He was the helpful one, the calm one, the good one, the pure one. But now, there was something else inside him. Something took root, some word that made sense, some word that made life. And he was still a doer. But now he

was a doer *because*. He was still a servant, but now he was a servant *because*. He was still pure and good and faithful, but now he was pure and good and faithful *because*.

Because? Because the word took root in him. He looked into the mirror and didn't like what he saw. Because what he saw was emptiness. What he saw was the duty of faithfulness, the burden of purity, the task of service. What he saw was a void where his motivation and his soul ought to be. But when he looked into those eyes, the eyes he knew from his own birth, the eyes that managed to love him even when he didn't want them to, those eyes seemed to call for more and now seemed to give more. When he looked into those eyes, it was as if something took root in him; something was planted: a reason, a purpose, a new beginning, a new soul. And all that he did, he did because of that implanted word, that hope revived, that soul restored. It has the power to save your soul. That's what he wrote. Not the works, Luther, the word implanted. The works grew out of the salvation; they didn't earn it. He needed that word implanted.

He didn't earn it, but he had to welcome it. He had to welcome it with meekness, with gentleness – the eighth fruit of the Spirit, the very essence of God. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Welcome the word with gentleness, not because of our weakness but because of his strength.

Sometimes quietness is healing and restoring. Sometimes it is troubling, reflecting the emptiness of a soul. Sometimes it is a waiting for a word, needing hope and a reminder. Come, Lord Jesus.

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Making Distinctions

September 5, 2021 – [James 2:1-10, \(11-13\), 14-17](#)

Color: Green

### INTRODUCTION

This one is a potential minefield of issues and observations that could surprise the diligent worship team attempting to capture James's central point. James points out the economic distinctions that we are all too likely to make in our hospitality ministry. But it wouldn't be too big a leap to talk about racial and immigrant and gender and orientation distinctions at the same time. This is not, however, a recommendation to avoid the issues. We are called to speak up and to follow the boldness of James and talk about the lines of respectability that we too often draw, consciously or unconsciously. It is better to enter into these delicate subjects knowingly than to be surprised.

How do we proclaim inclusion, particularly in what are often homogeneous congregations? One way would be to look at the source of the words that you use for worship. We offer, in our liturgical resources, liturgies from a wide spectrum of writers and encourage you to look at the source of the prayers and litanies and songs that you choose for worship. Who is given a voice in your worship setting? Is it only those who look like you? How might other voices be heard?

Ruth Duck, in her book *Worship for the Whole People of God* (Westminster/JKP, 2021, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), points out that to sing a song from another culture as a one-off is not as welcoming as we might think. It would be better to become familiar with the songs even before seeing them as invitational (See Chapter 3, "Diverse Worship", pp.51-55). The purpose of broadening our horizons is not only to be appealing to others, but to increase our own understanding and experience of the world. This enables us to see commonalities and connections and lessens our desire to make distinctions between cultures and peoples.

How can worship bridge the gaps that we have begun to take for granted in our world? What symbols can convey reaching across the aisle or tearing down the walls that separate us? Maybe the hospitality team could take the lead in this worship experience to talk to us about what it means to welcome and to include. What priorities help us overcome the distinctions that we might unthinkingly

make? Let this be a worship experience of reconciliation, not just between individuals, but between the church and world, between economic status, between races, between orientations. Let's tear down what divides and invite all into the discipleship journey so that we can be forgiven and transformed.

## **PREACHING NOTES**

James clearly builds on the final verse of chapter one: *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.* (James 1:27 NRSV) Left alone, we could all claim to be obedient to this. So, James gives us a test case. If we're honest, we have to squirm a little bit as he describes the scene. Of course, we've all done this; we've all shown partiality in this. We hope we're overcoming it; we hope we're countering it; we hope we're better than that. But our society has drilled into us to value people on outward appearances more than essential being.

What is fascinating about James's test case is that he seems to be talking to the poor – at least to the working class. Look a little later on when he says, “is it not the rich who oppress you?” (v.6). He's making a distinction between those folks out there who are rich and those who are poor. So, this is also a hospitality issue. Who are you happier to see come through your door? The ones who can help you pay the bills or anyone? This means, in part, that this comes back to who are you really looking out for? Are you really interested in yourselves and those who can help you realize your vision for the church? Or are you interested in “seeing all the people,” as we say in Discipleship Ministries? Is it about the inward focus of the church or the outward mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? The world, notice, not the church.

This is not, however, a mission strategy, it should be noted. At least for James, it isn't. This is the core of the faith. Pay attention to how he begins this chapter: *My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?* (James 2:1 NRSV). Did you catch the shift in that single verse? “Do you not with your acts really believe . . .” This is the struggle that has bedeviled the church from the beginning: faith and works. We have too often turned this into a dichotomy or even a struggle – faith versus works. James wants

nothing to do with such a false divide. With your acts, we see what you really believe. You can say you believe all kinds of things, but your life will bear witness to your beliefs, says James.

A little time could be spent here on what we mean by the word “believe,” especially in a New Testament context. We so often use the word *believe* to mean *intellectual assent*. To believe in something is to hold in our heads. Sometimes we use the word *fact*; sometimes we use the word *truth*. We hold these beliefs as truths in our heads. Certainly, that is about half right. There is an intellectual component in the concept of belief. But that isn’t the only element of belief. When John 3:16 declares that “whosoever believes,” it isn’t asking only for an intellectual assent to the idea of the Christ. It is asking for a life that reflects that core belief. It isn’t really asking “do you believe” but “are you willing to put your life on it?” “Does your life and your witness, do your actions and your words tell us that you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of your life?” That’s what it means to believe in New Testament terms.

For James, then, at the heart of believing is how we view and then treat others. Do we somehow see some as more worthy of grace than others? Do we act as though there are those among us who deserve a higher place, more attention, more service, than others? That’s what he is wrestling with here in our text for this week – making distinctions, giving preferential treatment to one over another. Key for James and the early church was the distinction between rich and poor. That was, in his view, what was tearing the church apart. Certainly, we have not changed too much from the descriptions he provides in this chapter.

But we are required, yes, required, to point out other distinctions that we are making in the lives of our church today. Fundamentally, it is the distinction between those like us and those who are not like us. We give preferential treatment to those of our race, of our gender, of our orientation, and yes, our economic status. And in so doing, we are claiming that these “others” are not as worthy of God’s grace as we are. Our favoritism claims that they are not as deserving of a place at the table as we are. Distinction means that they are those whose voices need not be heard. No wonder James sees it as such a core issue of faith.

He also, in this text, gives the lie to the “thoughts and prayers” as being an adequate response to human need. Certainly, we need to be in prayer for those who are hurting. Certainly, we need to be mindful of those who are suffering. But to believe that this relieves us of a responsibility to act is not adequate to the gospel we claim to believe. This is what brings the charge of dead faith from James. It is a faith that doesn’t act, doesn’t live out what is core belief. It is faith, James would argue, that isn’t faith.

He isn’t saying that we are saved by our works. That has always been the warning in the midst of this. It is why Martin Luther was afraid of this letter. Luther feared that people would read it as saying that do enough good works and you’ll receive salvation. But that isn’t James’s argument. Instead, he is saying that true faith has to come out in words and in deeds. It isn’t just about what resides in our heads but what comes out through our hands.

“Doers of the Word”: that’s our theme for this series. Chapter two of the Letter of James can boil the doing down to making distinctions. If it seems too simple, it is. But as with most things that matter, simple doesn’t mean easy.

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Taming the Tongue

September 12, 2021 – [James 3:1-12](#)

Color: Green

### INTRODUCTION

How do we talk about gossip without gossiping? James wants to help us tame the tongue. It's true that we don't take this one all that seriously (see the preaching notes for more), but we've all experienced the sting of the tongue as we were growing up, and even as adults. We all know what it is to bear the brunt of rumors or misrepresentations or words spoken in anger. And just as likely we know what it is to watch our words bring pain to another, intentional or not. How can we get worshipers to take this text seriously? What stories do we tell? What confessions do we make? What prayers do we pray?

Maybe we could provide space for people to come and kneel and ask for God to heal us from sting of words, given or received. Anointing could be offered to aid in the healing process. Let people write down the words they used or that were used against them and then fold them up and burn them or leave them at the cross on the altar.

Care must be taken in the words used in worship. Knowing what we know about the stories of those who gather, we can pay attention to the images we use that might trigger unintended responses. Then we must realize that there are even more stories and experiences before us of which we are not aware. So, we must be even more vigilant in how we present God and what words we are wanting to put in the mouths of those who worship with us this day.

### PREACHING NOTES

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Where did that bit of wisdom come from? Certainly not from James. He holds a counter position. "The tongue is a fire," writes James, and "no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison." And so dangerous is this appendage that everyone should think seriously before becoming a person of authority, before deigning to teach and to lead and to speak to other people. You almost get the

idea that it would be better to just not say anything at all. A difficult position for a preacher to take!

We could imaginatively psychoanalyze James and determine that someone said some terrible things to him and now he's taking it out on us. But if that causes us to dismiss his argument as a personal problem, we're missing the point. Neither is this simply "political correctness" run amok, over attention to minor issues of social discourse. No, James elevates words and the power of words to an ultimate level, implying that it is a life and death issue, a salvation issue.

In our normal catalog of sins, gossip is somewhere far down the list. We are much more concerned about other kinds of misbehavior. James would have us reconsider our hierarchy and raise our awareness of the power of words to bring harm to the body of Christ.

Perhaps the sermon could focus on verse 9, or verses 9-10. Let's talk about the good we can do with our words. Let's talk about what it means to bless. The internet is full of lists of ways to praise a child, for example – the words we can use for encouragement and for building up. Some time spent inviting the congregation to recall how they felt when someone said good things to them or about them. Have them reflect on the impact of those words and then understand how powerful words are. Lead with the good examples.

Be careful, however, in doing the opposite. It might be more effective to talk about the effects of curses, of name-calling, of hate speech more obliquely, so as not to send someone down a spiral of despair or depression. Do not minimize the effect of the use of the tongue for curses, however. Do not imply that it isn't as destructive as it truly is. The examples might be more social than personal, for example. This would be a good place to present the power of words to perpetuate white supremacy or a patriarchal culture. How we talk about other races, how we talk about different genders, or different orientations is very much what James is talking about when he says the tongue can "curse those who are made in the image of God."

It is time for the preacher to be direct here. The changes that need to take place in our society must be addressed. The changes that need to take place in the human heart need to be addressed. It is possible that your congregation will respond that they do not use words in that way, that they do not demean others

because of their race or gender or orientation, that they do not attempt to categorize human beings with such language. Even if that were true, they certainly hear others do it all the time. If we are to be salt and light in our world, then we can begin to bring a new way of speaking into the world. We can encourage others to change their tongues to focus more on blessing and less on curses.

Watch your tongue, says James. He says it here and he says it in chapter 1, verse 19, and again in chapter 4, verse 11. This is important. This is part of the works that betray the belief that we hold about who we are in Christ Jesus. The destructive, cursing kind of speech reflects on the community as a whole. One of the factors that is often quoted by those who leave the faith is how Christians talk about one another and about the world around them.

It is easy to dismiss this text as dealing with a non-essential. Surely, we might think, there are more important issues to deal with than how we talk. But James makes a convincing argument that the words we use reflect our relationship with and belief in Jesus as the Lord of all our life. He is giving the lie to the idea that says I can compartmentalize my life and give Jesus parts of me but not all of me. James is aware that the tongue is a small thing, and yet this small thing just might provide the direction for all of us. This begs the question, "Who are we really following and where are we heading?" "Can a fig tree bring forth olives or a grapevine figs?" The fruit we produce with our words reveals our hearts.

## Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Root of Conflict

September 19, 2021 – [James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)

Color: Green

### INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to submit yourself to God (James 4:7)? And how is that the same as “draw near to God and God will draw near to you” (James 4:8)? Our text this week seems full of ethical or moralistic advice. Do this and stop doing that.

The danger is that it can come across as another self-improvement process that is likely to end in failure and frustration; that is, without the key elements of verses 7 and 8. There is something in those verses that makes all the rest of it possible.

Therefore, it seems like the first goal of worship today is to help people draw closer to God. Of course, that is the purpose of worship every time we gather. But here the emphasis is on the surrender, the invitation to “submit yourself to God” in a way that empowers behavioral change. Perhaps it is here that we reintroduce the altar call, not as emotional manipulation calling for a response in fear or shame, but as an opportunity to remind the worshiping congregation that being made into disciples of Jesus Christ is a lifelong process of continual surrender and participation with the Spirit leading to lasting transformation and growth. There may be emotion involved; we are rarely purely rational beings. But it is more about the conscious decision to see ourselves as works in process, surrounded by support and grace from God and the community. This moment, wherever it might come in the order of worship, can be both a powerful individual statement and a cementing of the community as a body working toward the ideal of Christian perfection.

This text is an opportunity for self-examination. What resides in our hearts? We can't always see ourselves, so we need others to help us with this process. Worship could introduce the idea of the “soul friend,” one who speaks truth to us. Certainly, our prayers can ask for God to make known what sins reside in our inner beings and to invite our openness to change, to rooting out what we have clung to so tenaciously. Time for confession and renewal as well as the assurance of forgiveness is crucial in this process.

This is not, however, about therapy or even counseling. Worship is about pouring ourselves out to bring honor to God in our lives. But it also works to cement relationships with the worshipping community that will help us hold on to the commitments that we make. When we submit ourselves to God, we can begin to see the wider body of Christ as a resource for personal and corporate growth. What opportunities might we provide for praying for and with one another during worship?

The preaching notes emphasize peace as the central gift we are seeking. Peace is possible, even while we are works in process. This isn't about completion and the satisfaction of a job well done; it is about a journey of discovery and transformation. But peace can be our companion in the journey to keep our feet on the path. The call to commitment is not an anxiety-driven threat, but an encounter to know peace, even as we acknowledge a need for growth. It is a commitment to a partnership with the Spirit and with the community of faith that will see us through whatever might come.

### **PREACHING NOTES**

Author Evelyn Underhill wrote that it was interesting to her how the time that Jesus wanted to offer his followers peace was when they were on the threshold of the most tumultuous time of their lives together. (See Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*, Morehouse, 1981, 62) "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27) Then Jesus went out and died a most painful death. He was betrayed and denied and abandoned. He was beaten to a bloody pulp and hung on a cross to suffocate and die, to be mocked and spat upon, sneered at and ignored as one more example of how not to live in peace. "Not as the world gives."

Maybe that's our problem. Maybe we just don't understand peace. Maybe we've defined peace as the absence of something, of conflict, or worry, of trouble, of doubt; but Jesus wants us to define peace as a presence. Peace is not what we've emptied from ourselves, but what we've filled ourselves with. And what we've not filled ourselves with is ourselves – at least according to James.

James doesn't like all this hanging around waiting for stuff to happen. He wants to get to work. James is a doer, a worker. And he says if we are going to fill ourselves up with something, if we are going to occupy ourselves with something, it might as well be the right things. There are the heavy things, says James, the things that weigh you down, the things that are never satisfying, never enough, the things that always make you want more, that measure your worth not by what you have but by what you don't have, or by what someone else has. We can occupy ourselves with filling that bottomless pit in our souls that is never content but will use any means, will break any bond, will step on any toe to get what satisfies that gnawing hunger that won't ever go away.

Or, James says, praise be to God, we can make peace; we can sow peace. We can work peace, says James – the peace that says I am not the center of the universe, even the universe of my own understanding and experience; the peace that says while I am loved and valued, I understand that best when I love and value others; when I act out of respect and hospitality; when I cede center stage so that I might applaud another; when I give aid and comfort; when I bind up and heal; when I mentor and teach; when I pour myself out in the name of God into lives of those I love around me.

The harvest James mentions is not peace. Did you notice? Peace is not an end. I know we pray, "Give me peace." Jesus even said in the Gospel of John, "I give you peace; my peace I give to you." But it isn't so that we can become peace hoarders, so that we can stock up on peace for the lean times, the difficult times. Peace is the mode of action. Peace is the methodology by which we choose to be at work in the world. We sow peace; we make peace; we bring peace; we toss peace around like seeds, like cool drinks of water on sweltering days; we plant peace in hearts - our own and everyone else's.

It sounds like work. That is the opposite of what we thought peace was, once upon a time – the kicking back, not really caring kind of peace. No, this peace is the enemy of apathy. This peace turns the tables on injustice. This peace brings a sword that cuts through pretensions and falsehood, through prejudice and oppression. Yes, it is work. Sowing peace is an all-consuming enterprise. But it does have an end. A harvest James calls it. A result.

Righteousness. That's what James calls it. A harvest of righteousness. What is that exactly? Well, Jesus called it the kin-dom of God. It is the body of Christ living as though they were a body. It is a community of faith and faithfulness that lives in love together and builds a sanctuary against the life that tears down and separates. Righteousness is about being faithful to our relationships, about honoring the covenants, with God first of all, but then also with brothers and sisters - those in the faith and those not yet there. Righteousness is about living as though God were the determiner of who was worth loving and who wasn't.

Peace, like joy then, is an outcome of love. When we learn to love God, we will know peace. When we learn to love like God, then we will make peace; we will sow peace.

## **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Power of Prayer**

**September 26, 2021 – [James 5:13-20](#)**

**Color: Green**

### **INTRODUCTION**

We think prayer is something we know about. But do we? It is probably best to not enter into this worship time assuming everyone has a firm grasp on what prayer is and how to do it. This could be an important teaching time for many in the congregation who struggle to pray in meaningful and life-changing ways. The worship team should consider follow-up sessions on prayer stemming from this service, because there will no doubt be questions and concerns that arise.

Yet, even during the worship time, there is an opportunity to provide help to those who struggle with their prayer lives. It would also be helpful to address those who want to pray but don't feel like they know how and those who don't think prayer is worth their time. There are many who hear the common "sending our thoughts and prayers" and believe that it is a way of avoiding taking a stand and making the changes that need to be made. How do we redeem the idea of prayer from those who have presented it as ineffectual and easy?

James doesn't believe it is ineffectual. This epistle of doing, of putting your faith to work in the world, of living out salvation in ways that impact the world around you, also believes that prayer is a power we need to use. Find the prayer servants in the congregation and give them space to talk about what happens when they pray. They can talk about what happens to them and what happens in the situations for which they pray. Find stories of the power of prayer in the lives of individuals, but also stories of communities of prayer and how they grew as disciples because of their disciplined approach to praying. Prayer and action are not opposites but complements in the spectrum of responding in faith. Prayer can be a launching pad to action and then a reflection on the action done, and through it all, prayer is a way of being reminded of the presence of the Spirit in what we do.

Worship can offer forms for prayer, prayers that show how prayer is shaped. That way worshipers can use the prayers provided but can also craft their own prayers following the form or shape of prayer. It gives a running start to those who may feel that they don't know what to say.

Prayer stations could be set up through the sanctuary or even throughout the church as an interactive moment to go and seek out space to pray and to find more information about prayer. One could invite prayers of petition; another might have prayers of intercession; yet another could focus on prayers of praise. Incorporate movement or art in these stations or prayer moments throughout the worship experience. Let there be a rhythm to prayer in the life of the church as a whole.

Dedicate the church to being or continuing as a place of prayer. Don't let any meetings happen without prayer, for example. Establish prayer chains or lift up those that exist already. Tell people how to share their prayer concerns. James says go get the elders and have them pray. We are to be a praying church and leaders are available for the task of praying.

### **PREACHING NOTES**

A siren broke the relative Saturday morning silence as I sat down to write. It was close enough to be heard, but far enough that I was uncertain of the direction or even the kind of siren. Was it an ambulance racing to someone's home where a fall had taken place or where a sudden malady had struck? Was it a fire truck hurrying to salvage a house before it was consumed in fast-moving flames? Or was it racing to rescue a child who had tried to climb through a fence that seemed wide enough at first, but then wasn't? Or was it the police, heading to the scene of an accident or a crime, or both?

Our little town had been rocked by an accident that became a crime in a matter of seconds. A car, out of control, driving recklessly, managed to careen over a curb, crash through a fence, and land in a yard, resting on its roof. An officer came upon the scene, climbed out of his squad car and stooped to look in the upside-down windows to see who was hurt and how he could help. Then one of the occupants pointed a gun in the officer's face and shot him, point blank, fourteen times.

This was a Thursday worship night at Southport United Methodist Church. I had been home preparing and then headed out to go back to church for the evening worship experience. I left home around three; worship was at six that evening. I found my way from the house to the church blocked from multiple directions. I had to take a circuitous route to finally get there, much later than I figured,

wondering what in the world was going on. School had just started down here, so I thought it was quite a disruption for the first day of school.

By the time I got to the office, I asked the staff what was going on, and they told me what they knew. To an outsider like me, Southport is a part of Indianapolis; it's a big city. To those who grew up here or who have made their home here for many years, it is its own thing, its own community. The officer killed turned out to be someone we knew, not just a uniform on a big force. He was in our church recently because one of the kids in the day care pulled an alarm, and though we called and said it was nothing to worry about, the police said they had to check. So, they came and walked around. They took care of us. Even though they didn't need to, they checked, stopped to look in to see whom they could help.

That evening, I was approached by one of our worshipers who told me she was struggling. She said that in 2015 she retired from the police force after twenty-one years of service. She had heard that another officer, one in an accident earlier in the week, had died that day. Then the shooting in Southport. She was feeling cut off from the community of which she had been a part for so long. She was feeling unmoored in a dangerous world, drifting alone and hurting. She scrambled for something, anything. She said, "Could we . . . pray . . . about all of this?"

Worship is about God, not really about our needs. Yet there was nothing more of God that night than to pray. I set the sermon aside for a while, and we just prayed. We put ourselves in God's hands in those moments and leaned into that embrace. We poured out our sadness and our fear. We offered up the uncertainty of a world of such suffering and such cruelty. We admitted our anger and frustration and cried out for justice, even as we were hoping for mercy and for grace.

Then we tried to listen to James. We liked that he was adamant about prayer in all circumstances. That he ends his whole, very task-oriented letter by telling us to pray. Because we're sick or because we're well. Because we're suffering or because we're cheerful. We should pray. Pray with the sighs of our hearts; pray with the songs of our souls. We should pray. And pray together, call on help when our own prayers seem to be bouncing against the ceiling, lost in the clouds above our heads. We liked that there are tools to help in our praying. We can pray with our hands, laying them on those for whom we pray. We can pray with the oil of

anointing, not because that makes the prayer better, lubricates the prayer machinery somehow, but simply because it gives us something to grab hold of as we pray. It gives us something to do with our hands. We found James helpful for our praying. Mostly. Sort of.

Well, there was that bit where we stumbled, where we averted our eyes and furrowed our brows – when he seems to confuse praying and sinning, or sickness and sin, like our sickness is caused by our sin. And we know better than that, having been raised in a scientific age. We know about germs and disease and genetic time bombs, none of which are our fault. It kind of makes us want to dismiss the whole thing. Okay, maybe in a healthy lifestyle choices kind of way our illnesses can sometimes be the result of our actions and our decisions. But that isn't what James is really talking about. He's thinking of a more direct correlation, isn't he? About divine punishment because of bad decisions, or even thoughts, right?

Or is he? Is the link we read there not really there? Is it that we've put it there, or those who have gone before us put it there and we can't get it out of our heads? What if it isn't about a correlation, but about an effect? The effect of illness and the effect of sinfulness is the same, or at least it was in James's community. Those who were sick were shunned, quarantined, set aside. And so it was with those who were found to be sinning. Just set them aside, excommunicate them. That was the practice, some historians argue. And maybe it still is in a way. We just don't want those people around, those sinners, those unhealthy ones. James is trying to tear down that wall, trying to say that even the sick are worth our prayers, worth our time. They should call the elders of the church; they should call on the community to come and be with them, anoint them, lay hands—yes hands—on them. Touch. Inclusion. Sinners too, says James. Don't let bad decisions, bad choices, wrong values, separate us. Pray for them up close and personal. Include them, invite them. Be invited if you've separated yourself because you were afraid of what they saw when they looked at you. Find a way back, a way to accept the grace that the community wants to pour out on you. Come back and be prayed for, prayed over.

Though we hate to admit it, James seems have more confidence in prayer than we do. The prayer of faith, he writes. The prayer of the righteous. Powerful and

effective. The prayer of faith will save the sick. Well, we think, sometimes. We've heard of the rare occasion, the unexplained miracle. (Can any miracle be explained? Isn't that part of the definition?) When someone gets well, despite the predictions to the contrary. James seems to think that is what we should pray for always. Pray for and hope for and expect. Sure. Why not hope for a miracle?

Yes, we ought to pray for miracles – but not miracles tied to this life. Instead, we pray for the miracles that bring us home. James actually doesn't say that the prayer of faith will heal the sick, but that the prayer will save the sick. Save them, which means inclusion in the kingdom of God. It means inclusion in the community of faith. Paul tells us that we were given the ministry of reconciliation. That's our job, not miracles of healing, but miracles of inclusion, miracles of hospitality. We are called to tear down the dividing walls and build up the body.

We are called to heal the community, not just the individual. Or rather, we heal the individuals by making sure they know they have a place to belong, a place that cares for them, a place that wants them, a place that honors them when they step into tragic circumstances for the good of the community at large. And it seems to me that the way to honor the sacrifice of the officer who stooped to help someone in need is not to call for vengeance, but to continue to stoop ourselves. Stooping is easy. Just get on your knees.