



Let us pray: Eternal God, we confess that we live very individual lives. We want to follow our own paths in life. We want to make it on our own. We want to find our own happiness. We want to live by our own rules. O Lord, even in our faith, we tend to think in very individual terms. We talk about a personal relationship with you as if it is just about “you and me.” We are tempted to think that faith is [only about] what we do in church on Sunday mornings. Yet

you show us a different way. For in your word you [also] teach us ethics. You show us what it means to live in a community of faith. You call us to care for the poor and those in need. You remind us again and again that a living faith includes faithful actions and deeds. Help us to live in this world in joyful obedience to you, out of gratitude for all that you have done for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**¹

Tradition says that the *Letter of James* was written by James, the brother of Jesus. The James that became the head of the fledging Christian movement centered in Jerusalem. The reading from James this week is the only reading from James in this liturgical year, and thus, I think, it deserves our attention today.

Hear again James 5: 7-10 but this time from The Message by Eugene Peterson:

7 Meanwhile, friends, wait patiently for the Master's Arrival. You see farmers do this all the time, waiting for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work.

8 Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong. The Master could arrive at any time.

9 Friends, don't complain about each other. A far greater complaint could be lodged against you, you know. The Judge is standing just around the corner.

10 Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God.

The image or metaphor of farmers waiting for crops to mature is one familiar to most of us living in Indiana. We know that crops simply take a certain amount of time from waiting for the soil to be warm enough to plant, to planting and hoping birds do not take up too many of the seeds, to waiting, watching and worrying about too much or too little rain or sunshine, to testing for dryness before harvesting so that the harvested crop does not rot but rather continues to dry until it is needed for food for animals or for grinding into meal. This can be a metaphor for our lives as Christians.

Our lives, like the crops, are in God's hands. Our time is not God's time but we are called to do our part to make God's time a reality on earth. The question is what we do with our time, our talents and our treasures as our part of responding to the love that was given to us by God.

¹ Bruce Gillette and Carolyn Winfrey Gillette in “The Letter of James” in Christian Reflections, a series in Faith and Ethics (Baylor University, 2012), 53.

Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146: 4-9; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

The *Letter of James* is famous – or perhaps infamous – for two main things: that we need to bridle our tongue and that faith without works is dead. Most often we tend to read “faith without works is dead” as opposite to Paul, especially Paul in *The Letter to the Romans*. Paul writes that we are justified – that is made right with God- through faith. Martin Luther encapsulated this as “sole fide” or only faith. Thus, for many, James’s insistence on works seems opposite and has been ignored as not being consistent with the Gospel. Paul’s “only faith” has been seen by some as relying strictly upon the Torah and not as taking into account Jesus’s commandment to love neighbor as well as loving God.

But Paul and James don’t have to be inconsistent. James is intent on helping us see that following Jesus demands an active life of faith. Our faith is not passive- saying we believe and doing nothing more is not what Jesus commanded us to do. It is not the type of life that Jesus led.

In fact, when John the Baptist cries out to Jesus from prison: “Are you the one who is to come ...” Jesus does not reply “yes” or “no” but rather Jesus tells the disciples to respond to John: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Go. Tell. Hear. See. Receive. Walk. Cleanse. Action, not passivity.

We are called to act. To live as Christians engaged with our community. To determine the needs of the community and to respond to those needs. We do not and cannot meet every need by ourselves. This is one reason it is so important to work with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Together we can meet the needs of the community. Separately we cannot. We are called to discern our gifts and talents and to use them to build up the body of Christ.

This week alone this parish has gathered gifts for the mentally challenged, gifts for children whose families are unable to provide a minimum of two wants and two needs, and to distribute food to those who came to the Food Finders event. We also hosted the League of Women Voters meeting, a meeting of the Women’s Legacy Fund, the Community Chorus rehearsal, the Flower Lovers club, Girl Scouts and the Youth Service Bureau. In each of these ways, St. John’s is living out our faith and being a good neighbor. We cannot rest on our laurels, though. There is more work to be done each and every week as we seek to see and to serve Christ in all persons.

The actions of St. John’s this week live out our faith in the world. This is part one of what James believes we must do as part of our faith. St. John’s mission or vision statement commits each one of us, however we are able to, to live into the reading from James when we say:

We are committed to God, to our church, and to each other as a family in Christ, providing and cherishing spiritual growth and living our faith in the community

Action in response to our faith is necessary. There is another part we need to remember and live into as well. James is concerned with our tongue. “Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!” James knows how devastating words can be. The old saying: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words may never hurt me” is simply untrue. Any of us who has been the target of epithets or taunts or bullying knows that saying is untrue. The vitriol that flows as common and accepted discourse

Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146: 4-9; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

today aims at denigrating others who do not believe as we believe. Responding in kind escalates the hatred and moves us even farther from the love of God and love of neighbor.

One of the most loving things that St. David's, Beanblossom, did in response to the graffiti, epithets and Nazi swastikas spray-painted onto its building the night following the election was to let those taunts and insults stand for three weeks until the community could come together to wipe them away. This was an intentional decision by the members of St. David's that they would not pretend the insult had not happened, they would not rush to wipe it away, they would rather stand as an example that we can overcome such cruel and hateful behavior. The community gathered round on November 30th for a celebration of light over darkness. Their next event is a concert on December 18th titled "Reclaiming the darkness with light." A reminder to us of the beginning of the Gospel of John: the darkness did not overcome the light of the world.

Todd Still, professor of Scripture at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, says:

The things we say or fail to say serve as a barometer of our Christian character ... the (in) ability to master our words is both a metric for and a mark of our spiritual maturity.²

All of us sometimes say things in haste or in anger that we later regret. I hope that each of us recognizes when that happens and make amends via apology to the person to whom we have said such things. James believes deeply that as Christians we must recognize that our speech matters. Words can and do hurt just as they can and do build up. Our call is to love neighbor in how we act and in how we speak. Although not part of today's small snippet from James, when we read the *Letter* in its entirety, we hear again the admonition to make your yes, yes and your no, no. There is no need to embellish or be afraid of the truth. James is reminding us of what Jesus said in Matthew 12: 36-37:

I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

James reminds us that both actions and words will be how we are judged when we stand before the judgment seat of God. Know this and live. Know this and act. Know this and love. **Amen.**

² Christian Ethics at 29