

Sermon Easter 5 2021

May 2, 2021

James 1:16-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Epistle Lesson previously read.

As you all know, I generally make it my custom to preach on the Gospel Lesson. I think I've mentioned it before, but I had a professor in seminary who told us that by taking his class, we were making a tacit vow to always preach on the Gospel Lesson every Sunday. Now, you have to understand first of all that he couldn't truly bind our consciences to such a vow. That's a manmade law and consciences can't be bound to that which is manmade. However, his point was to be well taken. The Gospels speak of the life and words of Jesus, and so deserve a certain honor in view of that. But sometimes there's something in one of the other lessons that's just striking or particularly appropriate. This week was one of those times. As I read the lesson I was struck. I actually was struck in particular at these words: **“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”**

Why do you think I was struck by this? I'm sure with hearing my sermons week in and week out you can make a guess. We need to hear these words in our day so badly. Everyone is quick to throw out their thoughts, to express their opinions. I heard it said so well on a podcast I was listening to this week. The personalities on the podcast were making the point at how interesting it was during the pandemic that so many people found themselves with so much extra time—and extra worry to boot—that they suddenly became experts on everything. Very quickly you could look on social media and find a vast pool of voices that spewed forth intense proficiency in understanding what science is, where it is to be found, what virology truly knows at its heart, how epidemiology properly works. And that was just by May. By June, that also included intense proclamations of what race relations needed and what the heart of justice truly is. And that only continued into all manner of political expertise as things progressed toward the election.

Of course, that's the joy of our current media environment, isn't it? The professional media have created such a divisive environment in their desire to gather viewers and readers that the result is a backlash where now everyone sees the need to be the voice that speaks. And when everyone speaks, the voices get louder and louder.

I'm sure you've seen that in a gathering like a banquet. To start you have a small number of people present, and they can talk at a normal conversational level, or even in a quiet tone. But then as more people arrive and begin to converse, it becomes harder to hear, so what happens? The people there have to speak more loudly. Then what? Then it's harder for the other people to hear, so they have to increase their volume. Eventually, everyone is speaking loudly and no one's being heard easily.

Isn't that where we are now? And what's the result? We're seeing more and more anger. It's coming to a spot where everyone is speaking, and people aren't really listening, and so tempers are flaring more and more. To put it in the context of the verse, we're seeing the anger of man and the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. And isn't that something we're witnessing as truth?

So, what do we do? We listen. It's a cheesy cliché, but I'm sure you've heard it—God gave us two ears and one mouth that we would listen twice as much as we speak. But of course, that leads to an extremely important question. To whom should we listen? Well, I've been addressing our interactions with our neighbor, so on the one hand, of course we should listen to them. That's what love does. Love listens to the neighbor, and in doing so gains trust.

I was reading something that said that the difference between corporate managers who were well liked and those who weren't often came down to those who were perceived as good listeners. And how did that perception come about? By asking questions. If they would ask three questions every time they interacted with their subordinates, they were perceived as caring. They listened and it was viewed as though they cared—of course they may not have, but the perception was they did. Do that in the world, ask questions of your neighbors. Find out things about what their lives are like. Find out things about what their views of God are like. And don't feel like you have to stuff our beliefs into the conversation every time. Show that you care, and confess your faith naturally. You'll find that people will then listen to you. But as I go down that rabbit hole, I digress, because the reality is that although we certainly need to listen to our neighbors, we first and foremost need to listen to the Word of our Lord.

This can be hard for us can't it? It can be hard especially to do so in humility. We have a strong tendency to want others to know how much we know and how smart we are, and so sometimes we don't listen. I remember that for myself in particular when I was in a Bible Study I was in for Navigators, the Non-denominational group I was connected with in college. Now, you've maybe heard me say that I'm not fond of such

groups gathering without the oversight of a pastor, and my 20 year old self was the exact reason why. We were talking in the study and salvation came up. And I blurted out about how because the Bible tells us that God doesn't show favoritism then that meant salvation is up to us, and if we're just sincere and try hard, then God will let us into heaven. Christians, I hope you can hear the arrogance by which I spoke. That's exactly what the Bible doesn't say. It doesn't tell us that it's about us being sincere and trying hard. Oh no. It's about our utter inability to even try. It's about the unfathomable depth of our sin, but about the even more unfathomable depth of God's love for us in that broken and sinful state. And so, we need to listen to what it says.

We need to listen all the more because of what that Word is, not just what it says. Look at what James says here, **“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures... [and] receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”** Now James doesn't directly say what this Word is in that. He doesn't tell us about how this is the Word of the God who created all things by His Word, who sustains all things by His Word, Whose Word works all things. But he does tell us that this Word brings us forth, that this Word is implanted in us and saves us.

And think about that Word in your life. That Word of God that tells you of your sin, that tells you of what God commands and tells you “do this and you will live.” But then also tells you that “no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing [those commands], but through those commands we become aware of sin.” In other words, tells you that you will fall short and so deserve temporal and eternal punishment. And we understand that what that Word is doing as it tells us that is that it is slaying our sinful natures. It's tearing down our arrogant sinful selves. As James says, it's working in you that desire to put away filthiness, wickedness, that self-righteous anger. It's doing so to prepare you for that Word which actually brings life to you. That Word of Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

That's the word that you hear in absolution, that Word that tells you that on cross your sin and death completely met their end. That bleeding and dying of Christ covering over them all, and the resurrection freeing you from their bondage. And the Word brings that to you. Thinking of how it says it here, making you a “kind of firstfruits.” And that's a theological term. When the Israelites brought their offerings, they brought the firstfruits. They brought the best for that offering. Why? Because that would earn something before God? Because it would merit a position before Him where they would have His favor by their works? No. Because it was a response to His goodness to them.

And that Word tells us that we are brought forth as His best because of Christ. And of course, that's baptismal. It's the new birth of water and the Spirit. It's the Word that plants us into the death of Christ's tomb, but raises us in that resurrection.

But as I say that, perhaps the best part of all of this is the certainty. The certainty is what drives this. It's what brings about the ability for you to do these things. Hearing of the certainty that this promise is true, that this God doesn't lie, as Luther so often points out. That certainty grounds you in the assurance to not fear if your voice isn't heard, but to just listen. That certainty grounds you in the assurance to know that this God will take care of you. And how does James say it? Look at the words. These gifts are from God **“with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”** Now that's actually astronomy language. That's the language of observing the sky. The word for variation is the same root as our word parallax. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but my understanding is that parallax is the phenomenon where a star appears in different places in the sky depending on your place on earth; the change of it, it's movement. Then the shadow due to change from what I read is the “darkness caused on earth by movements in the constellations.” The point is that as the ancients looked to the sky, the things there demonstrated change and instability. But this God doesn't do that. He doesn't change. His Word doesn't change. His promise to you doesn't change. And that promise actually enlivens you in Christ.

In that life, then Christians, we live in the midst of this world. And as this world is dividing and arguing, we have the One who reconciles. By His grace, carry that reconciliation into the world. Which means we do need to speak that, to speak God's Word into the world. For example, this week in our sister church in Finland the head of the church body and a member who is a minister in their parliament were charged for hate speech because of the biblical view of sexuality. We need to keep speaking those things to the world. But we need as much and more to speak that reconciliation that Christ has won for us.

To be clear, don't be shocked if the world ignores it, or appears to. It often does ignore it. But know that the God who has reconciled Himself to you will care for you as His firstfruits. In fact, as I speak to you about listening to those who need your care and listening to His Word, know that He is the One who always, always hears you. And He promises that as the One without change. Amen.