



The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2021

“Anger”

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“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” (James 1:19)

Let us pray: O God our dwelling place, in Christ you made your home among us. Lead us in the paths of truth and integrity until you bring us to your holy mountain and we live forever in your presence; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

This Sunday is the beginning of a series of readings from the book of James. Although Martin Luther made critical remarks about the book of James calling it an “epistle of straw” in his preface to James, the book retains a significant place in Scripture. The author is really unknown but some believe it was written by James the brother of Jesus but others question this since there are at least five James mentioned in the New Testament. The reality is that does it matter who wrote

the letter? What we have is a basic perspective the author brings to Christian proclamation. The driving questions in the book of James concern the shape of Christian life. According to one article I read for our second reading from James stated, "Faith that is not active is not faith at all."

The passage is very intriguing for me. It basically is asking two questions. First is "Who is God" and the second is "Who are you?" Well we get a sense of who God is in our lives and that is a big question for all of us but more importantly is the second question for me, "Who are you?" Who are you when it comes to your life in Christ is the big question that I see in the passage.

Who is God? According to the beginning of our passage, God is "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." It appears that the people that James is writing to are those who have received life from God. Without this, there would be nothing further to say, since people have something to give precisely because they have received from God. How do any of us stop and recognize the gifts that we have received from God. They are plentiful if we stop and really think about it. The concern for humankind is that we always want more or other things and we don't recognize the many gifts that we have already been given. Some people do recognize the gifts given from God

but then forget about them and seek more from the world of things they believe they want and maybe not what one really needs.

There are many things that stand out for me in this passage from James. It appears that James composed this epistle to be very practical. He seems to be addressing some specific issues going on in a specific Christian community.

Perhaps it was the church that James worshiped in, or perhaps it was penned for another community elsewhere. It also seems that whoever James was writing to he was dealing with some infighting and anger over the very nature of ministry and the divisions between those who have the resources to serve others, and those poor enough that they needed served.

Does this sound familiar to you? “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” I cannot think of another time in my lifetime that there seems to be so much anger in the world right now. I have stated on several occasions that the political climate in this country is without a doubt very toxic right now. It seems that it might have lost some steam but there seems to be some folks who think that they are right and don’t care about anyone else’s opinion. Schools have found themselves in the midst of decisions dealing with the virus and the new Delta variant that is finding its way into our communities.

Should the students be masked or not is the big question. It has pitted parents against each other and people against their elected school boards who are trying to keep all of the information in front of their decision making.

There was a story about a parent somewhere in the country ripping the mask off of a teacher in protest that the teacher was even wearing a mask. Is this what God is seeking for us? The anger that has permeated our society in recent years and that the virus has not helped matters is behind people's actions. James is saying to all of us today to first listen and be slow to speak. It is the old count to ten before you speak so that you can stop and think about what you wanted to say. That is not an easy thing for many people to just stop and think before they speak. It is something that I had to learn very quickly when I entered the ministry. Coming from my construction background where responses at times had to be immediate it was hard to learn to stop and listen before responding.

That also helps to curb one's anger when we listen first and take our time responding. The big one for me is to be slow to anger, according to James. "For your anger does not produce God's righteousness." James values listening, temperate speech, and humility in all areas of life," according to Frances Gench in her commentary of the book of James. So we think of religion as a good thing and a strong faith in God and Jesus the Christ as a good thing but then there are the

times we don't want to go overboard and so we shrink back from our faith. But to James' way of thinking, religion is not a casual matter. It calls for serious commitment, both in terms of careful "hearing" and faithful "doing." Our passage for today challenges us to respond to God's word.

The bulletin cover for today states, "Be doers of the Word." James says beginning at verse 22, "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror: for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like." For me that is a powerful image thinking about looking at oneself in the mirror and then forgetting when they walk away from the mirror.

I am sure you have seen images of people's T Shirts that say on the front of them, "Be Kind." How many people look in the mirror one second and then head out of the house for another round of anger towards those they run into who may not agree with them? People who do not look like you and me have been the targets of unwanted anger towards them to the point of them receiving bodily injuries from the anger that is spewing from certain people. The other night on the evening news there was a story about a local Native American whose property was the sight of destruction and theft while he was away staying with an

uncle who was on hospice care. The gentleman stated that he was being targeted by his neighbors and others and being told that his kind is not welcome here and that he should go home. So what's wrong with this picture? He is a Native American. They even stole his American flag and his Native Lakota flag from his yard.

We are the church but at times that doesn't seem to be the true story. What mirror are church people looking in? What do they see? I have been hearing some troubling stories about churches but more importantly about the people. There is ugly infighting in churches and disagreements, and angry words, and factions verse factions on either side of an issue that has created such anger. Some of my colleagues have been experiencing such anger against them because of a difference of opinion. I was hurt to the core this week when I heard there are female pastors in our Synod who are being harassed and picked on during this pandemic only because they are women.

Folks, James is speaking to each one of us. Look in the mirror and what is it that you see? On Sunday morning as I prepare for worship I look in the mirror to make sure that everything dealing with my clergy attire is in place. This passage now is challenging me to look closer at myself and think about who I am and whose I am. We look into a mirror seeking perfection but that is not the case all

the time now is it? Why do we walk away from seeing ourselves in the mirror and then forgetting what we have seen? What is it that you see? What is it that I see?

There is one more thing for us to consider from James today. James points to what ministry is. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to care for orphans and widows in their distress.” When it comes to faith, serving those who need served isn’t extracurricular. It’s not a nice little extra. It **IS** our faith. It’s foundational. Take it away and you no longer have pure religion.

We are living in some very strange times right now. There is so much anger all around us. James states in verse 25, “Being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.” Folks, you find yourselves pitted against some of what you see or hear or experience in this strange time. But James tells us to listen and think and be hearers but do not respond in anger. Wow that is so hard to do at times now isn’t it? James goes on to say, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, there religion is worthless.”

So here is our challenge. When you look in the mirror ask yourself what you see. Then think about who God is and who you are. Remember that God forgives our sins because of Christ’s action on the cross for each one of us and try

to, as James says, “Keep oneself unstained by the world.” To do so one has to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Then remember to care for the folks in distress. Be kind to one another no matter what and as James says, “Faith that is not active is not faith at all.” Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, there is so much anger in our world right now. Help us to curb our anger and to listen and be doers of your word. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.