

***A sermon preached on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021 based upon James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a entitled, “Exhausted, Disappointed, and Irritable.”***

When we read the various books of the New Testament, it is a little bit like listening in on a family conversation -- sometimes you might even call it a family *argument*, with plenty of “Yes, buts” exchanged regarding what it means to follow Jesus. For instance, if you carefully read the four Gospels you’ll come across plenty of places where the Gospel writers see things differently, even when telling the same story. It’s as if you can hear Luke saying to Mark, “*Yes, but you missed the point of the story.*”

A lot of arguments in this world are just destructive, but the arguments taking place between the New Testament authors are constructive. They’re all on the same team, trying to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of what it means to profess Jesus as Lord.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the letter of James, from which our reading comes this morning. If you read through the letters of Paul and then read James, you can’t miss hearing James as something of a rebuttal to Paul, *an extended “Yes, but.”*

Paul’s central insight was, “We are saved by grace through faith and not by works of the law.” Our salvation is a pure gift of grace that we receive through faith: we don’t earn our salvation by what we do. It was this insight of Paul that so captured the attention of Martin Luther that he started the Protestant Reformation.

James, though has a major “yes, but” to Paul which is to say, “*sure faith is important, but let’s not forget that **how we live** in this world matters greatly. You can’t just say ‘Jesus is my Lord and savior’ and be done with it.*” In his own way, Paul makes the same point, typically in the latter portion of his letters, but Luther was so troubled by James’ squabble with his hero -- the Apostle Paul -- that he once said the letter of James should be kicked out of the New Testament.

But it’s a good thing it’s there – because the letter challenges us to examine our lives as to whether we’re living in a way that reflects that Jesus really is the Lord of our lives, uncomfortable as this may be at times.

For instance, James spells it out really clearly that in the life of the church, if rich people get treated as though they are more important than poor people, then we’re hypocrites, making a mockery of the Gospel.

God loves all the same, and therefore in the church we’re required to live out a different kind of life from the way commonly found out in the world. In the church, all deserve equal love and respect.

In this morning's reading we hear James addressing a church where a lot of arguments are happening, and they aren't constructive ones. No, they're petty, tearing the community apart: what James calls "conflicts and disputes."

He talks about the "true wisdom", and how it can be found only from above – from God – and received in humility. It's James' way of talking about our reliance on grace.

The Holy Spirit is another way of talking about the wisdom that comes from above, and so the song Tracy just sang expressing our longing for the Holy Spirit sets the stage beautifully for the reading of our lesson.

Listen for the word of the Lord as it comes to us from the third chapter of James beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> verse.

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.**

**But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.**

**Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.**

**But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality**

*(including that whole business I mentioned before about viewing rich people as more important than poor people)*

**or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.**

**Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.**

**You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.**

**Submit yourselves therefore to God.**

**Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.**

**Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.**

***Thus ends our reading, may God bless our hearing of the Word.***

CS Lewis published a book back in 1942 that became a bestseller entitled, “The Screwtape Letters.” With humor but also great insight into human nature, the book is framed as a series of letters written by a senior demon named “Screwtape” to his nephew “Wormwood”, a *“tempter in training”* if you will.

In his letters, Screwtape provides guidance to the young Wormwood who has been given the assignment to tempt and damn a British man known throughout the book only as *“the patient.”*

At one point the subject of fatigue comes up. The point that Screwtape makes is that fatigue alone will not lead a person to succumb to temptation. Fatigue can produce gentleness and kindness just as easily as it can produce impatience and hostility.

For the latter to occur however, something else must be added to fatigue, and that is *disappointment*. Write Screwtape, *“To produce the bests results from the patient’s fatigue you most feed him with false hopes.”* He encourages his nephew to assure the “patient” that his hardship is nearing an end. Lead him away from an attitude of willingness to bear whatever may come – let him think in terms of bearing his burden only *“for a reasonable period – and let the reasonable period be shorter than the trial is likely to last.”*

*Screwtape writes: “It is not fatigue simply as such that produces the anger, but unexpected demands on a man already tired.”*

Lewis wrote his book while Hitler’s planes were bombing London, but I think his words shed light on what many of us have been going through recently. If you are like me, perhaps you have found yourself feeling irritable a lot lately. Maybe even hostile.

Most of us never thought the pandemic could ever last this long.

A whole year passed and it seemed like the end of the pandemic was in sight – – and, with it, the endless “conflicts and disputes” regarding how to deal with the pandemic. As we reached the summer, it seemed as though we were on the verge of getting back to a life more like what we called “normal.” Some of us began to get out and meet with friends to celebrate.

But then we started hearing at the **new delta variant** and the rate of infections and deaths began to rise. We’re back to more than 1500 people dying each day in America from Covid – and the arguing about the pandemic seems to just keep coming – in some ways intensifying.

And now nothing seems clear at all as to when the pandemic will be over – when we can stop worrying about quarantines and infections and people getting sick and dying.

I find myself irritable and frustrated a lot lately, and perhaps you do too. Screwtape's advice to Wormwood seems to be on the mark. Get our hopes up, and then snatch them away, and well, let's just say it doesn't bring out our best selves.

In this state, I felt somewhat **convicted** by our reading from James.

Frankly, I'm feeling kind of **humbled** at this point.

Early on in the pandemic it seemed that as a church we were successfully meeting the challenge, transitioning nicely to online worship, and connecting to one another through zoom.

The pandemic seemed to awaken our **spiritual longings**, and *impressive numbers* of people were tuning in and connecting online, and frankly I found it gratifying. I worked very hard and felt inspired to do so. I took some pride at how we were meeting the challenge presented by the pandemic.

But I didn't expect it to last this long.

Overtime the novelty of the challenge wore out. A sense of a "new normal" set in, unpleasant though it may be. The numbers of people tuning in online to our worship and to our zoom meetings gradually dropped off, and when we finally started letting people back into the sanctuary with safety restrictions, for a variety of understandable reasons relatively few have shown up. James talks about how **human wisdom** – in contrast to the wisdom from above – is characterized by "*selfish ambition*" and a "*boastful*" spirit.

Looking back on the pride I took in my leadership I recognize that such qualities were present in me – the arrogance in which I thought to myself,

*"Unlike a lot of other pastors, I know how to get us through this crisis."*

Using James words, "*I craved*" for success and when as time passed I didn't get the outward indicators of "success" I craved for, well, just as James suggested, I got irritable.

And ultimately, I've been **humbled**.

Frankly, I'm at a loss for how to lead the church forward right now, and truth be told I don't think anybody really knows either.

This is a time of uncertainty – a time of not knowing. And it's not just a matter of not knowing how long it will be till the pandemic no longer threatens us. It's also the realization that the world we've been living in – the world we've been trying to be the church in – well, in certain ways this world has permanently changed.

So, it's not just a matter of waiting for the pandemic to be over so we can go back to being the church the way we were before this all began.

We will have to find new ways to be the church – to be in ministry to the world. And for this to happen, we will need what James calls “the wisdom from above.”

So being humbled is a good place to start.

Being humbled includes owning up to the fact that we don't really know what we're doing or what needs to happen. Those ugly, divisive conflicts that arise so frequently are the product of pridefully claiming we **do** have the situation figured out.

So, I've been forced to do the sort of soul-searching that James is calling for. I recognize, as he says that my “*cravings are at war within*” me. I have craved for success and the honor that goes with being seen as a “success”. Cravings of my ego, essentially.

But if I search my heart, I recognize other, deeper cravings that can be overlooked especially in the midst of fatigue and disappointment. Beyond my shallower cravings, I know there is within me a deep craving to be faithful – to draw near to God.

And so, I need be aware of the distracting cravings I need to keep in check – and I suggest you try and do the same. And in doing so, to turn our focus instead towards the deeper cravings of our hearts.

I need to focus on being faithful, and not worry so much about being “successful.”

The Gospel lesson I chose not to use this morning essentially says the same thing. Jesus tells his disciples a second time that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and the disciples seem incapable of even talking to him about it.

Instead of talking to Jesus about what they're feeling, they get irritable and grouchy with one another. They start arguing – the petty type of arguing. When Jesus asks them what they've been arguing about, they too embarrassed to answer, because it was all just ego stuff: which of them is the greatest – like me wanting to be a thought of as more successful than other pastors. In response, Jesus tells them simply, “*If you want to be great, strive to be the servant of all.*”

This resonates with the clues James gives regarding what a faithful lives looks like. He talks about practicing *gentleness* and *mercy* and *making peace*, and *treating people impartially*.

Lord knows, there is no shortage of opportunity to practice such things in this confusing, troubled world of ours.

*“Submit yourself to God,”* James says, which in part means accept those things we cannot control, trying as best we can to **let go** of worry regarding when our problems will come to an end.

By focusing our lives this way, James says we will *“draw near to God.”* James promises that God in turn will draw near to us and we will be surprised to find peace like a flowing river in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty that frankly has always marked life.

We will find that in spite of everything, *“It **is** well with my soul.”*

*So let us sing now together the first 2 verses of “It is well with my soul.”*