

September 16, 2012

**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

James 3.1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Wouldn't it be nice if we could pick and choose what belongs in our biblical canon based on what each one of us believes at any given time? We could each have our own individual Bibles, stocked with only those things that make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside, only those things that agree with what *we* believe God does or says or looks like.

16<sup>th</sup> century theologian Martin Luther did not like the Epistle of James. He famously called it an "epistle of straw." While he never actually discarded it, he did call for its expulsion from the canon.

Luther's dislike was largely based on his fundamental disagreement with one line from last week's selection from James, James 2.24: "A person is justified by works and not by faith alone." Luther believed all of us—and especially himself—to be sinners to the core, understanding that there is no thing we can do to earn God's grace, there is no action we can take to earn God's love. Luther saw the Epistle of James standing in direct contrast to the writings of St. Paul, who offers to us in Galatians "a person is justified not by works of law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

Over the ages, most interpreters, clergy, lay and otherwise, have come to disagree with Luther. Works-righteousness, that is, believing that we can earn our place in the kingdom through our actions, has no place in the Christian schema, but James isn't arguing for works-righteousness. But then, nor does he believe that a Christian life can be lived without action.

There's a good reason that James maintains an important position in our canon. James is a powerful witness to the moral imperative of Christian identity. Martin Luther, in this instance, was wrong.

If you've been paying attention to anything I've said over the last few years, you'll not be surprised when I tell you that I like James quite a bit.

James is the lone wisdom book in the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible has several: Proverbs, Psalms and Song of Solomon, to name a few. The wisdom books are, as their name implies, notable for their social commentary and instruction on how to live an upstanding life. Out of 108 verses in James, 59 of them are imperatives, direct instructions to the reader or hearer. James was a great observer of humanity. He was a commentator and teacher and theologian. He had good ideas for how and why we behave the way we do and also about what we should be doing differently.

But James stands apart from the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible in its concern with morals rather than manners. While the more ancient texts of the Hebrew Bible aimed for success and honor through finding and maintaining one's place in the world, James instead focuses more on leaving the world behind through a full transformation of moral attitude and right behavior.

You can see how Luther might have gotten confused. James focuses a lot on how we are to comport ourselves, how we are to act as Christians in a secular world.

James spills a lot of ink over how to behave, from care for widows and orphans as we read a few weeks ago to controlling the wayward tongue that we hear about today, he *seems* to posit that it is through this discipline, self-control and giving of ourselves that we will earn—or lose—our place in the heart of God.

But James does not actually argue for works-righteousness, that what we do earns us favor with God. Nor does he believe that it is some kind of mystical combination works and faith that make us righteous. What James is arguing, in the whole of his short Epistle, is that a life lived in faith will be a life of good work, naturally. There is no real need, in James' estimation, to even discuss them separately, because action is the obvious result of a faithful life.

That is to say, James is not telling us that we must go out and do good things in order to show God how great we are. James is telling us that we need to dig deep, to examine our souls, to pull ourselves up and out of the muck of this world and into the light of faith, a faith given to us freely by a God who loves us through and through.

That alone is difficult: to go through the painful and ongoing process of self-examination, to find ourselves short and then to offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, back to God, as flawed but faithful creatures. We must trust that the grace we have been promised really is there. That is faith.

And when we have done that, the natural response of our hearts will be to share that grace by loving our neighbors, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, comforting the sorrowful. We will not go into the world with something to prove, we will go into the world with something to give.

These things will not make God love us more—that is simply not possible. But James teaches that our actions as people of faith will be as natural as breathing. That once we are, individually and as a whole, people freed by faith, we will move mountains—mountains of poverty, mountains of hate, mountains of ignorance and disease—because we are so compelled by our gratefulness.

James is intentional about pointing out to us the many places that we can explore our own contributions to the kingdom: in nurturing the community, in loving, feeding and clothing.

But he is equally concerned with the ways that we fall short of being the good holy people God created us to be. We get bogged down with the concerns of this insignificant world and, of particular concern in today's selection, we do not control our tongues, forgetting that it is not only our weapons that can maim, but our language as well.

Again, this is a disciple concerned with the moral imperative of all of Christendom: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. These are not easy. But this is the exceedingly high standard that James calls us into. It is the standard to which we, as Christians in community must hold each other.