

Sermon Text for Sunday, September 23, 2018

Scripture: James 3:13-18

Peacemakers

Just as we heard James ask a couple weeks ago “Is anyone religious?” (Do you consider yourself religious?) he now asks who is wise, or do you consider yourselves wise – well don’t brag about it, don’t claim wisdom you don’t possess.

James is giving his listeners another warning about speech and our lives. Last week we talked about cracking the whip to tame our tongue. Now James reminds us about showing our wisdom through our lives, not with boasting or bragging. God is not impressed with how well one can speak but with how we show wisdom in our lives, what choices we make and how we live out our beliefs.

This is a call to examine ourselves to see if there is ‘bitter envy’ or ‘selfish ambition’ in our hearts. James assumes that believers must take responsibility for their destiny with God by making wise choices that resist doubt or their desire for worldly evils. This is our free-will.

These five verses say a lot to us. Just what is the wisdom that James talks about? We learned a few weeks ago that wisdom was something that Solomon prayed for in 1 Kings 3:9, wisdom is a reward for humility and faithfulness. Wisdom is defined as the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight. Wisdom is associated with attributes such as compassion, learning about ourselves through our experiences, and virtues such as ethics and benevolence. In addition, wisdom is the soundness of action or decision with regard to the application of experience, knowledge, and good judgment. Wisdom is shown as much through our actions as with our words.

James shows in these verses that there are two kinds of wisdom, worldly wisdom and heavenly wisdom.

Don’t we all know people who are worldly wise. Those people who can work the system to have their needs met. The Greek word James uses is ‘eritheia’ meaning selfish-ambition. Aristotle used this word to refer to ‘self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means’, something that gives us a more contemporary glimpse of James’ meaning. This is the earthly wisdom that James refers to. A wisdom that gives preference to wealth and status. A wisdom that assigns importance to what is in the world including the outward appearance and tangible holdings of a person. These are things of the world – and these things are born of envy and selfish-ambition as James tells us in verse 16. It is this world-wise atmosphere that disorder and evil practice flourish in. The Christian community should not provide another forum for human jealousy and ambition to work themselves out. We should not be a source for this earthly wisdom to flourish, that kind of ‘wisdom’ the kind that leads to bragging is not from God. Instead, James describes it as earthly, sensual or unspiritual, and demonic or devilish and leads to anarchy, disorder, chaos, and every foul deed as James states in verse 16.

A few weeks back you heard about being a friend of God – James here gives us a few more virtues that make one a friend of God in verse 17. This list contrasts with what James said of earthly-wisdom in verse 15. Heavenly wisdom is pure, peace-loving, considerate, willing to yield, merciful, impartial, and sincere. These are virtues that God desires in a friend.

Verse 18 concludes James’ thought process by pointing us back to verse 13. The wise must demonstrate that they possess wisdom by works done in ‘meekness of wisdom.’ No one can pursue peace if they are driven by personal ambition.

“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness”

Matthew 5:9 tells us “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”

Isaiah 26:3 says of YHWH “Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace – in peace because they trust in you”

There seems to be a reference to God’s peace wherever you turn in the Bible.

Every Sunday in our list of prayers and concerns someone writes “Pray for Peace” which is a noble thing to do, we all should pray for peace. However, peace will require more than giving it mention in a pastoral prayer. Peace will require more than looking at the news and asking “Why don’t THEY stop fighting.” Peace is not only a global concept, or a national problem, or an issue in cities like Chicago or Washington, DC. Peacemaking is what James encourages everyone in his audience to do. Peacemaking must be every Christian’s goal. All Christians can take the initiative in promoting peace, helping to mediate conflicts, and standing up against a culture that glamorizes violence. This is what James is calling his audience to do, this is what we are called to do. Heavenly wisdom is a wisdom that lives in peace.

So, how do we find peace in a world where everything seems to be against peace? Many of you are probably rolling that scripture from Psalm 46 around in your heads “Be still, and know that I am God.”

How can we be still in a world that seems to suffer from activity addiction?

I was watching a football pre-game show last weekend and they were showing all the stars and quarterbacks arriving for the game. It struck me that hardly a single player was without headphones or ear-pods. Very few moments of our day are spent in stillness. We crave those distractions when walking, running, exercising, or even when meditating. We plug in, using noise to drown out the noise! If we can’t be alone with our thoughts, how can we find peace?

If we can’t be alone with our thoughts, how can we be alone with God? Psalm 46:10 does say “Be still, and know that I am God . . .” and this is typically quoted to illustrate that God comes in stillness. However, if you read verses eight and nine, you also get another lesson – let’s read them. I will read from the NRSV Bible and you can follow along if you like in your pew bibles on page 559.

“Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

These verses remind us that God can make wars cease so, be still, RELAX, stop struggling, know that God is God and God is in control. This is a reminder that one path to peace is to trust God, God is in control beyond our understanding.

But how – how do you convince someone who has had nothing but struggles and difficulty in their lives that they just have to trust God and everything will change?

There is a painting titled “Peace.” It depicts waves crashing against jagged rocks. It portrays the violence of a crushing storm. It seems anything but peaceful. But down in a small corner of the painting, tucked away in the rocks, is a little bird sitting on her nest totally oblivious to the raging storm all about. That is peace. For humankind to get there it is trusting God.

How do those of us who are disturbed by all the turmoil in this world find peace by just sitting back and trusting God?

We wonder and complain that the youth in our communities are not active enough in church. There are many reasons for that but don’t say that young people are not active or involved. It is that generation who are actively

participating in protests against oppression. It is that generation who speak out against social-injustice. Our youth, while not involved in completely religious activities, have a heart for mercy and justice that would be compatible with Jesus. Maybe instead of wondering about and worrying about their attendance on Sunday mornings, we can find a way to join them in the field of battle against such things as poverty, social-injustice, racism, and inequality. Working with other generations to create peace in a chaotic world.

We can remember that James also tells his listeners that we show our faith and live out our Christianity by doing – works of faith, serving God. “Be doers of the word, not just hearers” is expressed in James 1:22. So, when the Psalmist wrote “Be still, and know that I am God” it is not permission for Christians to sit around and wait for prayers to be answered and for God to act. It is a reminder that we don’t need to be anxious, that we can take our prayers and petitions to a God who is capable. We can lay our burdens at the foot of the cross, but, when God calls us to action then action is what we must take. We find peace by fighting against injustice and speaking truth to power. We find peace by crying out against inequality and oppression. We find peace by helping those who are unable to help themselves. We find peace in prayer – knowing what God’s word tells us – trusting in God’s promises.

There is a book “Streams of Living Water” by Richard J. Foster, published by Harper Collins Publishers, and I want to share a quote from a section talking about why God would reject his people (the Israelites) when they worshiped him with sacrifices, festivals, and music. “. . . all of the festivals, all of the sacrifices, all of the instruments and music of worship failed because they were not accompanied by acts of justice and righteousness.”

“God, you see, demands something more revolutionary than festivals and sacrifices and worship songs. And that ‘something more’ is social righteousness; impartiality in judicial decisions, equity in business dealings, justice for the poor and the oppressed. Because social righteousness is a divine mandate, liturgical (Church) life can never be divorced from it.” (pages 150-151)

Maybe we can look at verse 18 again – “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” We cannot reap a harvest of righteousness without being the peacemakers God calls us to be. That is what James is telling you today.