

Giving Gifts
James 1:17-27
September 2, 2018 – Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

The General Letter of James is not one of the better known books of the Bible. Tradition tells us it was written by James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. The author does identify himself as James in the opening of the letter; but James was a common name; so we don't know for sure who wrote it. The writer also states that he was writing to the twelve tribes, the groups of Christians spread across first century Christendom; so it was probably a circular letter. In the days long before Xerox machines, these letters would be read at a church, and then passed on to the next church to be read again to that congregation, etc. etc.

Martin Luther called James “an epistle of straw” – meaningless, worthless. You see James emphasizes the importance of “good works” in gaining salvation; and, of course Luther staunchly maintained that one achieves salvation only through faith – not through works. The Epistle of James was often “thrown up” to Luther as justification for what is called “works righteousness.” I like Martin Luther; and I also like the Epistle of James. On this Labor Day weekend, on this Communion Sunday, as we prepare to enter a new church program year, hear the wisdom of James: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”

What great advice to start our year: Be quick to listen and slow to speak. As, I stated in a sermon a couple months ago, God gave us two ears and only one mouth. How often are we quick to speak, to offer opinions or advice, or worse yet, to criticize the actions of another. Take time. Take time to listen. Take time to listen to each other. When someone else is speaking, and you are ready to jump in with a comment, ask yourself, “Are they finished speaking? Did I really hear them? Do I understand where they are coming from?” (And, Yes, I am speaking to myself, reminding myself of this charge, as I remind each of you.) Also, I've said it a hundred times before; but I'll say it again, “Take time to listen to God.” Take at least some time every day to just sit quietly, to relax, and to ask where God is leading you. To what is God calling you? Take time to listen.

Then the next admonishment: “Be slow to anger.” Anger is a negative emotion; and it generally does far more harm to the angry one than to the object of the anger. Anger is bad for our health, not only our mental, emotional, and spiritual health, but also our physical health – it raises blood pressure, cholesterol, and all sorts of negative stress hormones. And you know what? Frequently, if we take time to listen; we will not be inclined to anger. We may still disagree; but we will understand; and the anger will dissipate.

In the early 1990's, as the manager of a large IT Department, I went through some extensive training in, what at that time was called Total Quality Management. Part of that training was something called "active listening" – actively listening to what the other is saying. At that time, it was recognized that quality listening is indeed a part of quality management. I also note that active listening is a part of Stephen Ministry training and all pastoral counseling. There is very little that we do as either clergy or laity that is more important than listening to the thoughts, the feelings, and the concerns of another. Be quick to listen, and slow to speak.

Then we come to the part that Martin Luther has so many problems with. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." Luther said we are justified, we are made right, we receive salvation, by our faith alone – not by our acts. His adversaries pointed to James, saying, "We must do good works for our salvation." John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement some two hundred years after Luther said, "Luther was right, we are justified solely by our faith; but, if our faith is genuine, we will do the good works." Yes, I like Luther; but I like Wesley even more.

A couple weeks ago, I preached about Jesus as "the Way," and early Christians as "followers in the Way." I spoke of prayers that God would lead us in "his Way," that God would direct our lives. We pray it every Sunday, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Friends, when you pray those words, I hope you're not praying just that everybody else does God's will. Indeed, I do pray that everybody does God's will; but I also pray that will be a personal statement, essentially stating: "May I do your will on earth." "Lead me, Lord. Lead me in your righteousness."

I have entitled this message "Giving Gifts." Some of you know that I love languages, even though I'm not particularly gifted in language – I still love them. And a title like "Giving Gifts" raised a grammatical question: Is "Gifts" objective or subjective? And my answer is "Yes – Both." Let me explain: First the question: Are the Gifts the subject of the sentence? Are the gifts doing the giving? Or, are the gifts the object of the sentence? Are we giving the gifts? Now, maybe some of you can see why I say, "Both."

I have a friend in ministry who recently told his congregation, "Christians do not volunteer. Christians actively seek ways to serve." Here that again. Christians do not volunteer. Christians do not simply decide to say "yes," when asked to do something. Rather, Christians actively look for ways to serve. Christians give the gift of service, the gift of resources, the gift of love; and, in the giving, the gift gives back. Indeed, there is joy in the giving, in the serving, and in the loving. There is joy in sharing the Good News of God's Love in our words and in our deeds.

I often pray, in our Pastoral Prayer, that we might use every blessing that God gives us to be a blessing to others. Friends, God has gifted us. Compared to the rest of the world's population, we are all very blessed. And, yes, I believe we are called to use those blessing to be a blessing, to serve and to care for others.

James closes this section of his letter by saying, "Religion that is pure and undefiled is this: To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Don't hear those words, orphans and widows, as being limiting. James would not want us to limit ourselves. What is James saying? Real religion is about caring and sharing and loving; caring for and sharing with and loving all of God's creation; caring for and sharing with and loving all people, all those who are struggling, all those in need, all those in distress – all the family of God. Real religion is about keeping ourselves from, as the Common English Bible translates it, keeping ourselves from being "contaminated" by worldly things.

Indeed, this opening of the General Letter of James makes a great mediation as we head into a new program year and a new school year. Throughout this coming year, may we all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. May we truly use every gift, every blessing to be a blessing to others. And may we always give God all the honor and all the glory. Amen.

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