

Sermon for Trinity Church

Proper 21, 2018

"The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.... My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

Father Jed talked a few weeks ago about this morning's reading, the Epistle of James. Luther, he said, once referred to the Epistle of James as "the epistle of straw." I don't make a habit of disputing Luther but in this case, I think he's wrong. Context, as we know, can shape the meaning of anything, and the context of this letter is critical. The letter of James doesn't address people outside the church, people who might not belong; instead the letter speaks to the needs and intentions of the people who already belong.

I smile to myself when people speak nostalgically of how great things used to be. I recently received a picture of my maternal grandmother. This young bride, sixteen I believe, is standing before the most ramshackle house you can imagine; the roof is sagging and plugged here and there with spare and unmatched shingles. The fence is leaning in, stained everywhere by coal dust and the gate is falling. Of course, this was Appalachia at the turn of the last century, but I can assure you my grandmother never talked about the "good ol' days."

Just so with people who talk about how much better the first century church was than ours. People who say that, to paraphrase Charlie Brown, have not read the Bible. Many of the letters in the New Testament, including the famous Chapter 13 of Corinthians—"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." —were written to churches caught up in disagreement.

James, however, has a different approach. James, possibly the brother of Jesus, writes a letter that shows us habits for getting along together. The letter teaches us skills and aspirations that can make us a vital church community. Earlier in the letter, James tells the young church that if they want to identify as followers of Christ they need to practice these habits and skills for life. The church needs to learn to care for widows—remember there were no pension systems of any kind in that era. The church must also, as Jesus taught, care for the poor; no one should go hungry if the church could prevent it. And the church should care for orphans and not let them be led into poverty, slavery or death. If

you think about it for even a moment, these three simple directions are entirely consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Not difficult there. Further James wrote, the church should not chase the wealthy in preference to anyone else. All in all, practical and down to earth Christian teaching.

So far, so good. This morning's reading from the letter offers the conclusion of the letter, the summing up of James' thoughts. And here things get even more earnest. James wrote that if we pray for the sinful their sins will be forgiven. Will be forgiven. Straight forward, don't you think? But as I said earlier, context matters. If we think carefully about what James wrote, we can hear a different emphasis than we might expect. Our prayers are not directed to OUR forgiveness, not for our personal forgiveness. Our prayers are for the forgiveness of OTHERS. In sum, we don't pray for our own forgiveness, we pray for others. And that, my friends, is a very different emphasis.

We can't know for sure what was going on in the church of James, but we can read between the lines. Just as people often do today, the members of the early church may have been more intrigued with managing the organization than with the message. Don't get me wrong, the details of running a church, even a first century church, make a great deal of difference. Just ask the poor, the widows and the orphans. But the emphasis that James has in mind is just this—how do we bind ourselves together? How do we become a church? How do we become the family of Jesus, where DNA doesn't matter anywhere as much as faith?

The answer is right there in the closing sentence: "My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God." [The Message] There's a couple of terms in there that can hang us up. What, for example, does it mean to "wander from the truth?" This turns out to be useful caution in every generation, including ours. 'Wandering from the truth' is another way of saying sin. That said, we need to see something critical here—sin is not something we do, that is one-off, discrete, individual acts of wrong doing. Sin, as it turns out, is a way of life, a habitual way of life, and as such, its own punishment. Living a sinful life as James portrays it, will be a way of getting lost from what matters most.

What matters most? Family, the church, people in need, just simply, the love of other people. As far as James is concerned, if you're living the Christian life, as a way of life, you're already saved, forgiven, redeemed. You got it all. Your concern is for those who live a sinful life, that is, people who wander from the

truth. And lost people, as we all know, are unhappy people. People lost without purpose or direction or vision are very unhappy.

That point of view, if that was all that James had to say, would be a touch depressing. But that's not all James wrote, and his closing sentence is one of the most hopeful and optimistic you can imagine. He wrote, "you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins..." We can be read that sentence two ways, and James certainly intended this. If we bring someone back from sinful wandering into the church, lost and purposeless, we will save that person's life. And that's a joyful thing. But more than that, if we seek to always bring that person back, then sin will disappear for them, for us, and critically not just now but forever. Caring and loving others saves others and in turn, rewards us with a joyful life.

I know very well that the prevailing culture tends toward individualism, autonomy and self-regard. That's the way the world is and so be it. But here, in the church and in the family of Christ, we have one way to live, a life of pure forgiveness. And that life works like this, that we love God and others just as we love ourselves. Amen.