

## “The Book of James and the Elephants in the Room”

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Scripture: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Written for the People of God at St. Lucas UCC, September 23/23, 2018

Do you remember about this time a year ago, last fall, that we observed the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation? I mean, who could forget Russ Cottle, dressed as Martin Luther, reenacting that day when the German monk nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg? We, like other households of God's around the world, marked the anniversary in some way, noting that we would not be here worshipping as we are without that historic moment in Christian History.

Here we are a year later, 501 years post reformation, studying The Book of James together, so I thought I'd begin by sharing some of Martin Luther's thoughts on this New Testament text.

In 1522, Luther wrote: “Therefore St James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”

And later in 1542: “We should throw the epistle of James out of this school [i.e. Wittenburg], for it doesn't amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ. Not once does it mention Christ, except at the beginning. I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he thought, ‘Wait a moment! I'll oppose them and urge works alone.’ This he did.”

Infact, if Luther had his way, The Book of James would not be included in the Bible at all. Luther purposed his own cannon, or version of the Bible, which certainly did not include epistles of straw!

Luther provided his arguments of course, and theologians would be quick to point out that where James and Luther varied was much bigger than one letter. In that old faith versus works debate, Luther and James butt heads. And, Luther shows preference for Paul's writings, both in content and style and he questioned the authorship and authority, who was this “James”?

Remember, the Bible, is not *one* book but a collection of books, written by many authors, many unknown, over the span of roughly 15 centuries. Together those books contain our faith stories, and they have become a cohesive unit in as much as they are bound together between two covers. But friends, there is variance, even in-cohesion, in the stories and theologies contained throughout our Holy Book.

Take the nativity story for example. Mark, the first gospel written, has no mention whatso ever of Jesus' birth, and neither does John, the most recent Gospel. No Bethlehem, no star, no Virgin Mary. Matthew covers this story minimally, in just an angel's visit, and then it is from Luke that we learn all about Cesar and the census,

shepherds guarding their flocks by night, and the manger that would have to do. Four Narratives of Jesus's life, with little consistency even on the topic of his birth.

I don't point out these inconsistencies as a means to poke holes in our holy word. Or somehow put down the Bible. I don't mention the feud between an apostle and a theologian to put down anyone. For me, differing opinions, difference in general, isn't a weakness. It's a strength. It's an opportunity to appreciate the breadth and depth of human expression and theological imagination. With each varied experience a new perspective to appreciate, new insights to gain. People are different. Two eye witnesses would ever recall the exact same details. But when both accounts are held together, a fuller picture emerges.

Tension or conflict isn't just biblical in its literary mash-up and collective authors, it's also biblical in content. The Old Testament tells a story of a God loving during conflict, not in absence from it. Wars, conquests, murders, slavery, all abound, in what is actually a love story, between God and God's people. In the New Testament too, conflict, strive, suffering and disunity are all present and accounted for. And not just as the background, but central to our gospel lessons themselves. This good news, this new way, is all about being different *and yet being together*. Jews and Gentiles eating together. Samaritans and Nazarenes talking to each other. Widows and orphans, blind men and bleeding women, all included, in God's vision of community. Unity isn't conformity. No, inherent in unity is the notion of difference. When the church was born on that day of Pentecost we are told of the miracle when suddenly everyone began to understand each other's language. Notice it is **not** that suddenly everyone spoke the same language. That's a big difference! Huge!

Jesus attended to our differences in his ministry, most primarily. I mean, I'm sure Jesus does care about how we treat our best friends and dearest relations. He would want us to be compassionate, I'm sure, right? But notice, he didn't spend a lot of time teaching us about that. Rather, he did spend an awful lot of time teaching us how to treat the strangers we encounter, especially the ones that look, act and think differently than we do. Strangers, tax collectors, eunuchs... How we treat the least of thee, is what's most critical to Jesus.

Tell me, who are the Samaritans and tax collectors you encounter in your days. Who is it that you have the hardest time getting along with? Loud neighbors? Obnoxious boss? Estranged children? What about a Trump supporter or a Liberal? It's not easy to hear it, but those are the relationship Jesus taught us specifically to attend to - those where we are having the hardest time "being Christian". And so does James.

The people James was writing to were in a conflict themselves. Afterall, James didn't send them a letter that said, Keep up the good work! You're doing fine! No, he sent them a letter calling them out on some un-heavenly like behavior.

It's hard when conflicts arise, especially in church, but remember our treasured epistles were all written to churches/worshipping communities who were struggling in some ways. The church at Corinth. The church at Ephesia. And now in a church on Denny Road, we can turn to those biblical resources for wisdom. For now is our time and this is our place to once again, in our generation, respond to God's call for justice

and peace, in spite of and because of our differences. Sometimes, when we have a hard time being with those that think so different, we are tempted to leave. To find a new church, a place where the people think like me. But there is something holy about staying together, attending to difference, and living out our gospel mandate to treat our neighbors as ourselves.

I named this sermon, The Book of James and The Elephants in the Room, to shed some light on our conflicts. Because when it comes to conflicts, in our homes, in our world, even in our worshipping community, we'd much prefer to ignore them, like the elephants in the room. But there is a particular irony in that. Afterall, we are the church. **We are in this together. We belong to each other. And we can do hard things.**

But How? Well, church, if you are looking for some practical advice, some Instructions for being together in the market place and in the community, then friends you have come to the right place in The Book of James. James after all, it is a book for life.

In today's lesson, James is alerting us to two types of wisdom. Earthly wisdom and wisdom from above. Earthly wisdom, as James uses it, it actually an oxymoron, since there is nothing wise about it. It's the wisdom that promotes greed and power. The priorities of the world, not the priorities of God's dream. Wisdom from above, according to James, is gentle, and yielding and pure. Because his audience, the recipients of this ancient letter, weren't getting along, James warns them to examine their wisdom. Are they motivated by baser ways? Or are they attending to each other, with compassion and mercy? If there is any question, James suggests, we can look at our lives for evidence. You know a tree by its fruit, and the fruit of a life informed by heavenly wisdom is found in fruits of gentleness.

It's 2000 years later, and we are still struggling to do this together, to yield power, and to be gentle. That connects us to the players in our holy text. It reminds us of the timelessness of our faith, and indeed, ways in which our living word is alive today, shedding light for us in a time of disunity. People who are older than me tell me that this is the most divisive our world has felt. People are hurting in this disaccord, especially those that are most vulnerable, the marginalized and powerless. But there is hope. Good news. Another way.

James doesn't tell folks to give up, to forget about it, to go on to form separate churches, or isolated communities. No, James believes in them! James believes in us! He knows things will **be** better, when we **do** better. James teaches us to get along, by acting in the wise ways from above. When choices are to be made, earthly ways or selfish ways, shall be abandoned in favor of caring ways, peaceful ways. So which side is truly wise? Well, which side is gentle? Which side is merciful? Which side is yielding to earthly power? When we discern that work and do that work, we do it together for the common good as one body, made up of many parts - as Paul describes, each with our own spiritual gifts. And that is very wise.

Part of that comes with the wisdom of knowing that we, indeed, don't need to agree. We don't all need to speak the same language to understand each other once the Holy Spirit enters us. My favorite writer and theologian, Rachel Held Evans writes:

“The gospel means that every small story is part of a sweeping story, every ordinary life part of an extraordinary movement. God is busy making all things new, and life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has opened that work to everyone who wants in on it. The church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; **the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center.**”

Siblings, let's remember first and foremost, that we are caught up in the same story together, with Jesus at the center. A story of casting nets wide, not because it's easy but because it's righteous. When we pray for kingdom come on “earth as it is in heaven” we have a responsibility to be co-creators of that kingdom here on earth. Contribute to the common good. Look after the least of thee. Decrease so that others may increase. Producing good fruits in every season, thanks to the ways and wisdom of gentleness, purity, and selflessness.

At the end of this lesson **on** wisdom, the lectionary leaves us with a pearl **of** wisdom. **Draw near to god and god will draw near to you.**

*Draw near.* It's so intimate really. Draw near. Like a sleeping child nuzzles his mother or as lovers reach out. Draw near. It implies, as we say, that God is as near to us as our very next breath.

Not, seek God, or find God, or please God. No, draw near. Nuzzle up. Reach out. God is there and will respond by drawing near to you. That friends, is good theology, I don't care what Martin Luther thinks! In these hard times, in this age of elephants, we suffer in our disunity. We resort to those baser ways James describes. And when we do, we turn away from God. But there is another way. Another choice. And that is to draw near to God. Cling to God. Rely on God and God's wisdom. Like a toddler with separation anxiety, Draw near to your god. Your God will draw near to you too. And that both very good and very wise.

May it always be so. Amen.