

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalms 54

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

Mark 9:30-37

09/22/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

30[Jesus and the disciples went on] and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it;31for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 33Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Wisdom

Good morning! One of my favorite books, shows, and movies comes from the world of Middle Earth and the mind of J.R.R. Tolkien. He is considered by many to be the father of the fantasy genre, and his mark can be found in books to this day. The characters in Lord of the Rings, his most famous story, are incredible. We have Gandalf, a wise and caring wizard, Galadriel, a timeless elf of immense beauty, the strength of Aragorn and the determination of the hobbit Frodo. Time and time again we meet characters of immense knowledge, skill, and wisdom... and then there's Pippin. Pippin Took, or as Gandalf called him, a fool of a Took, is the youngest of those we encounter on the quest, and he has a gift for causing trouble. In a book full of wonderful and amazing characters, Pippin is by far one of my favorites. I'm not alone, a lot of people love Pippin, and I think that is because most of us can empathize with a character who doesn't seem to know everything. That's certainly how I feel in the chaos of life. The Second Testament book of James is written for people like me and Pippin.

For the past few weeks we have been working through a book in the Bible that Martin Luther hated but which I love. Unlike a lot of scripture, James gives us some concrete advice that I think pulls us out of our ivory towers and forces us to take some action down here with others.

Last week James discussed how our tongues, what we say, can be so dangerous. Where last week was a warning about the dangers it possesses, this week the writer shifts to some ways to help guide our tongues. The writer does this by pointing out that we often encounter two types of wisdom, that which is from above, and that which is earthly.

This earthly wisdom is described as almost like chaos. James writes *"for where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder*

and wickedness of every kind.”¹ This sort of wisdom tells us to take what we want. It encourages the strong to overpower the weak. This sort of wisdom justifies all means necessary. It steam rolls over whatever is in the way with no concern for the damage it might cause. We see it in the Gospels today too. Jesus asked, “*What were you arguing about on the way?*” *34But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.*” That’s earthly wisdom, arguing about who is the greatest.

But wisdom from above looks a little different. James writes “*but the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*”² Sounds a little different, right? The wisdom from above is often confused with weakness. In fact, to us who have grown up in a world of earthly wisdom, it makes no sense. Gentleness and peace are for the pushovers! It’s why Jesus’ words go over the disciples’ heads, it’s why they’re so confused. “*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ 32But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.*” How could an all powerful God do something as weak as being betrayed, beaten, and killed? St. Paul was right when he wrote “*for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...*”³

For James, writing to a fledgling Christian community, it is important that they hold fast to God’s word revealed in Scripture and the life of Jesus Christ. As one scholar writes, it’s about closeness for James. “*So, according to James, how does one become a person of solid substance, instead of a*

¹ James 3:16 NRSV

² James 3:17-18 NRSV

³ I Corinthians 1:18 NRSV

*person of insubstantial vanity? For one thing, “resist the devil and he will flee from you; draw near to God and God will draw near to you” (4:7–8a). Proximity matters.”*⁴

We have it a little easier than the disciple did, the life and teachings of Jesus need the context of the cross to make sense. But that doesn't mean it's a walk in the park for us either. It's been over 2,000 years and we're still trying to make sense of the cross. It's been 2,000 years and the words and lessons of Jesus are still challenging to understand. I especially like that James calls both options wisdom. It drives home the point that the place where one's mind starts will determine what seems smart or dumb. If your only goal is to get rich, to gain power, then one way of living life will have a different set of principles than the other. But that doesn't mean it's the faithful choice. It's easy to feel like Pippin, confused and unsure.

But the words of James are sound encouragement in times of uncertainty. When we don't know what to do, fall back on the basics: *“7Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8aDraw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”*⁵ Sounds like a good place to start. Amen.

⁴<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-2/commentary-on-james-313-43-7-8a-2>

⁵ James 4:7-8a NRSV