

## SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 12, 2021

ISAIAH 50:4-9A | PSALM 116:1-9 | JAMES 3:1-12 | MARK 8:27-38

For the past few weeks, we've been hearing readings from the book of James. We Lutherans have a notoriously complicated relationship with James. Luther's attitude toward James was, at best, ambivalent. In his 1522 translation of the Bible, Luther said that James "has no evangelical character about it," meaning that it doesn't have a lot of good news in it.<sup>1</sup> It mentions Jesus a couple of times. It never mentions the Holy Spirit. Luther's opinion wasn't quite *You should never read James*. It was more *Why would you read James when you could read Romans again?*

It helps to remember that Luther's primary concern in translating and teaching and preaching and all the rest was the relationship between faith and works. Are you saved by faith in God? Or are you saved by your own works? Everything gets filtered through that question. And if that's your primary concern, James isn't going to be super helpful to you. Go read Romans instead.

But we might come to this reading with a different question in mind. Not *Is it my faith or my works that give my life meaning?* But *What are the parts of my life that have spiritual significance?* And if you come to James with that question in mind, the text starts opening up in some new and illuminating ways. So what are the parts of our lives that have spiritual or theological or religious meaning?

We often draw a bright line between religious and secular, divine and profane, holy and pedestrian. I go to church and that's a religious thing. I go to the store and that's a secular thing. I donate food to the Center for Food action and what's a holy thing. I teach my kid algebra and that's a pedestrian thing. Pastor Joseph and Pastor Mike up the street are ordained clergy, so they're holy people. And I'm not, so I'm an ordinary person.

James takes that outlook and says that it's completely wrong. That whenever we try to draw a line between places, people, and identities that are spiritually important and ones that aren't, we're missing the point. As soon as we start talking about "parts," James says that we're getting off track.

You saw a glimpse of that in today's reading. James gives this long speech about the dangers of, well, speech. And he makes this interesting little observation. With our speech, he writes, "we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

What's important about that line isn't that we can say nice things to some people and curse other people. Anyone who has heard one of my homilies and driven with me on Route 17 could tell you that. It's that James describes other people not simply as "other people" but as other people "who are made in the likeness of God." We tend to think that when we're talking to God, that's a religiously important thing, but when we're engaging with other people, that's just everyday life. But James says that's not quite right. That whenever we engage another person, we are engaging someone who is made in the likeness of God. So every time we encounter another person or even make a decision that affects another person, we are engaging in a spiritually important interaction.<sup>2</sup>

This should put us on edge a little bit. Because it would be easier if only part of our lives had significance in the eyes of God. It would be easier if the only spiritually important thing I did all week was go to worship because I can focus for an hour and then relax later. Or the only time I had to recognize the image of God in other people was when I was volunteering or serving or helping

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy J Wengert, "Building on the One Foundation with Straw: Martin Luther and the Epistle of James," *Word & World*, Summer 2015, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Lossky makes a sort of interesting distinction between "persons" and "individuals" that's a useful way to think about this. Individuals are interchangeable and replaceable, but persons have unique histories and stories that are in relationship to God. So part of our calling is to treat others as persons and not simply as individuals. Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978).

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

them. But James says that every single interaction we have with others, every single part of our lives, has the potential to be spiritually significant.

And that's exactly why James warns us about our desire to become teachers. Is being a teacher bad? No, of course not. Being a teacher is great. James even gives us all these great images of the difference you can make. The spark that starts a fire. The rudder that steers a boat. The bit that controls a horse. Teachers are great and important and make a big difference.

The problem James is addressing is people's assumption that being a teacher is the only way they can do work that matters in the eyes of God. That my life over here isn't important in the eyes of God, and that if I could just get over there with the teachers, then it would really make a difference. It isn't that you shouldn't be a teacher if that's what you're called to do. It's that you shouldn't assume that's the only way you can make a difference.

The vision James gives us has two significant upshots, one that has to do with us and one that has to do with other people. The first is one we've already talked about. Every facet of life has the potential to become spiritually significant. This is what we mean by "vocation." We are always interacting with other people who bear the likeness of God. Vocation isn't a goal that you get to or something you acquire. It's a perspective on your life that allows you to see how we serve God and our neighbors in all areas of our life.

With a couple of exceptions, I don't think many of you want to become teachers, so taking James's advice is easy. But many of us have some sort of station in life that we come back to and think If I could get there, then I could do really important work. If only I had this job, this role, this relationship, this experience, this asset, then I could do something really important. James tells us that we don't have to look for meaning somewhere else.

The second upshot is that James gives us a way to understand diversity and difference. In James's vision, a diversity of gifts and experiences is a sign of vitality. After all, if you can do spiritually important work in every facet of your life, we don't need everyone to end up in the same place. Not everyone has to have the same gifts or talents or expressions or experiences. Not everyone has to be a teacher. The thing that holds us together is Christ, not our own designs. And no surprise some of the most spiritually important work we do is creating space for others to grow into Christ rather than forcing them to become more like us.

Take those together and you get a distinct vision of God's creation. A life of discipleship is not about waiting for the occasional moment of excitement between years of irrelevant tedium. It is learning to see the world and one another as brimming with potential. Made in the likeness of God and growing into Christ together.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor