

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

August 30, 2009
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
James 1:17-27

Be Love

As we move from summer into fall, we are making a shift in how we plan and lead worship each week for the next three months. For most of our pastoral ministry Jody and I have used what is called the lectionary in the selection of Bible readings for the focus of worship each Sunday. There is much to commend the use of such a resource. The lectionary is a three-year selection of scripture readings that if faithfully followed each week will expose one to most of the story of Jesus as reported in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And although it would be impossible to cover the full breadth of the rest of the Bible in the Sundays of three years, the lectionary does hit the high points and the most important stories and events there. After having cycled through the full lectionary four times in our nearly 13 years here, we've decided to follow a somewhat different course in September, October and November this year. Of course we will still be including Bible readings each Sunday and those readings will be the source of inspiration and focus. These Scripture passages have been selected by us to emphasize an aspect of our faith that we believe will strengthen us spiritually individually while at the same time bolstering the ministry of this church.

This fall we'll have discipleship as an overarching theme. Although this is basic to what it means to be a Christian, we believe that the time is right for us as a church to look at this more closely again and understand what it means for how we live out our faith. We've been inspired to do this after having read a book by a Lutheran pastor in Minnesota, Michael Foss, who suggests that the Christian church today must concern itself with making disciples of Jesus rather than maintaining members of the church. For when the church's focus is on maintaining members it sacrifices its outward action orientation for a more inward self-serving and maintenance orientation. And of course as we study the scriptures and learn of the history of the church what clearly comes through over and over again is that the church is for everyone, both those who have made a commitment to be disciples as well as those who have yet to be called to discipleship. As Foss reminds us, we're called by Jesus not to make members, but to make disciples. So we'll be examining more closely those Scriptures that teach us this and equip us to more faithfully live this out. (2000, *Power Surge*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press)

Providentially, although today is the last Sunday until Advent that we'll be using the lectionary, the lectionary reading from the book of James serves as a most helpful introduction to this theme of discipleship. James is one of those little New Testament books that while short in length is nevertheless packed with pithy wisdom and instruction for the early Christian church. Although this book is called a letter, it is not as narrowly constructed as such. Rather it can be understood as a treatise or presentation of important matters facing the Christian church. There are two of these matters addressed in the little section we just read this morning that I want to talk about a bit.

The first is the quote that is featured on the cover of the bulletin today. "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." (James 1:19-20) It is clear that James would not be including this imperative to temper the human tendency to do just the

opposite of what he is instructing unless that is what he was observing. In other words it is quite likely that the church in his day was rather *slow* to listen, *quick* to speak, and *quick* to anger. Clearly the church in James' day was acting much like the church of our day acts.

These words to listen more and speak less and to resist anger, are words of wisdom that come from those among us who have lived long enough to see the consequences of the impulsiveness of youth. Many of the wisest of the sages among us demonstrate this very quality of genuine listening and when speaking choosing words carefully and succinctly. And many of the wisest souls on earth are motivated less by anger and more by hope.

Why is this lesson so hard to learn? Why are we often led to believe that it is more faithful to let anger lead to speaking that in turn angers others and motivates them to anger as well? We can see this going on in the healthcare reform debate going on in our nation at the moment. Slow to listen, many critics as well as supporters have taken bits of misinformation that led them to a quick anger. Those so angered in turn spread that misinformation that is then the basis for others to respond with anger as well. A spiral of sorts gets set up that leads farther and farther from the truth with little or no listening going on leaving a whole lot of angry people in its wake.

I'm sorry to say that this happens in the Christian church even to this day. In our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), there are members of local congregations who have become angered in recent years over various decisions that have been made in the church that they convince the congregational leadership to petition the denomination to let the congregation give up its historic affiliation with the denomination and become part of another denomination. Sadly, this movement has made its way into our own regional governing body, the Presbytery of Yellowstone. In fact this afternoon, the congregation of the Springhill Presbyterian Church, located about 15 miles north of Bozeman will be voting on just such an action. Although it is a matter of subjective opinion just how quick this situation came to be to lead the church's leadership to recommend this to its congregation, that quickness to speak and quickness to anger must be considered in the light of the years and decades in which the congregation has been in place. Across our presbytery which includes the southern and eastern 2/3 of Montana, many church members and pastors are in pain over this decision even before it is made. After this vote is taken and tallied this afternoon, it will then be in the hands of the presbytery itself to decide the fate of this congregation. The earliest opportunity for the presbytery to take an action will be at its meeting in early November. It is not for me to be quick to pass judgement on the congregation of the Springhill Presbyterian Church. But it is for me as a member of the Presbytery of Yellowstone to take these words of James and urge the presbytery to heed the wisdom they contain before it makes a decision. "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

The second matter arising out of this pithy passage is perhaps the one for which this little book is famous or infamous depending on your perspective. "But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (James. 1:22) And then in the next chapter in verse 14 is, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" and then in verse 17, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." What makes this part of James infamous is what prompted the great Protestant Reformer

Martin Luther to say that James is a right strawy epistle. It was Luther's contention that James didn't even belong in the Bible. So concerned at the time of the Reformation was Luther that the church had lost its central focus on the saving grace of God and had let slip into the faith the idea that there were actions and works that must be done in order to earn God's favor and hence salvation. So Luther was hypersensitive to anything that would suggest that it is anything other than or in addition to faith in Jesus as savior that would result in eternal salvation.

While keeping Luther's concern in mind it's important to understand the context in which this letter of James was written. Apparently there were those in the early Christian church who took the promised salvation from faith alone to suggest that once one professed faith in Jesus there were no implications for how one lives as a disciple of Jesus. So extreme had become this stance that some of these Christians became almost aloof and unengaged with the society and communities in which they lived, turning a blind eye to the human need, injustice and greed that was around them. It was at this point that the writer of James enters the scene and tries to shake these complacent Christians and awaken them to their more appropriate role within the community, that of carrying on the ministry of Jesus, reaching out to the poor and downtrodden and challenging the assumptions that lead to poverty and suffering. While Luther could not see it through the lenses of his day, there is no apparent contradiction in what James is saying with the central Christian doctrine that our salvation comes solely through our faith in Jesus. It is *because* we have been saved that we are called to the good works for which James is advocating. It is not in order that we be saved, but as a result of our salvation that we show our gratitude by carrying on the work of Jesus.

With regard to our focus on and attention to discipleship, we would today also emphasize that a vital church is a church that is engaged in the world with disciples who are engaged in and carrying out ministries of healing, hope and compassion. A membership-oriented church could be understood as similar to the church to which James was speaking—a group of Christians who was less engaged in the world and more inwardly attuned. So as we begin our attention on discipleship we too are called to think about how we show our gratitude to God for our salvation. Does it show in our daily lives in how we spend our time, in how we choose our priorities, in how we manage our resources?

Faithful and loving discipleship calls for active engagement with the world. Faithful and loving discipleship calls for wisdom and patience. Over the course of the next three months we will be delving into these aspects of discipleship as well as others that stem from them. We are already looking forward to renewing our commitment to work together living out the love of Jesus as fellow disciples in carrying on the work and ministry of Jesus in this place and around the world.