

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for April 3, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 5:1-8 and James 2:14-26

HOW IN THE WORLD?

For the past two Sundays we have read from Paul's Letter to the Romans where the apostle's paramount message is that we receive life, hope, and salvation only by being set right with God and we can be set right with God only by the grace of God embodied and fulfilled for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul insists we are opened up to receiving that grace, whoever we are and wherever God finds us in life, as God's Spirit moves us and leads us to put our faith in Christ, trusting him and entrusting ourselves to him. I cannot win God's favor by being more religious, more virtuous, or more charitable than other people; neither can I climb closer to God by any rigorous attempts to be a good person or a good Christian. God has no merit system. God's passion is not for divine authority and rule; God's passion is for the salvation of humanity and of this world God created and continues to love. God looks with compassion, not scorn, upon this world's people.

Has God, then, no anger? God has the anger of a parent who loves but whose children abuse each other and wreck the house. Is God tolerant and permissive? No, God's love for the children goes far beyond the easy detachment of tolerance and the irresponsible parenting of permissiveness. God is never indifferent toward us – neither toward our welfare nor toward the harm we do to ourselves and to each other. Indifference, not anger, is the opposite of compassion; it is the coldest kind of hate. We cannot hurt each other without thereby hurting God. The effect upon God of our overt cruelty and our self-serving indifference toward people's sufferings is revealed upon the cross of Jesus.

Today, we interrupt Paul's message to hear what seems to be a contradiction to it from the Letter of James to the Christian churches. Martin Luther saw the potential conflict with Paul's gospel and so with Luther's own primary doctrines: that justification (being set right with God) comes only by God's grace to which we can respond rightly and helpfully only with the grateful entrusting of ourselves and our lives to this wondrous gift. *By grace alone, through faith alone!* For Luther as for Paul the very idea of good works gaining God's approval and favor was a heinous rejection of grace and of Jesus Christ himself.

But remember, Luther was combating the church's self-serving sale of indulgences the real purpose of which was funding the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Church leaders who had assumed responsibility to care for the people were playing upon the people's

fears of hell and love for each other to con them out of what little money they had for food. Buy an indulgence and so get your father or mother out of purgatory, protect your child from the wrath of God, or just spare yourself centuries of torment. Paul was contending for God's redemptive love against a legalistic system of merit that despised sinners and tended to see suffering as proof of sinfulness.

We need to remind ourselves regularly that beliefs matter, not for the sake of the church's authority, but for the sake of God's love and mercy. That's why the gospel of Jesus Christ is always *contextual*. What does that mean? It means God always meets us where we are and as we are, and so God's word is always addressed to our life situations as they really are unfolding. Things change. We change. Our needs change. The absolute, the constant, is God's love for us.

So, we come to the Letter of James, which in his zeal for the desperate struggle into which he was thrust by the gospel, Martin Luther dismissed as "an epistle of straw." Why? Context. Luther's opponents were no doubt using James the way a child tries to twist what the parent said yesterday. "You said she had to share with me!" "Yes, I said she had to share with you, and I meant she had to share the cookies I had left out for both of you. I did not mean you have the right to go into her room and take her things." Context. The declaration of James that "faith without works is dead" seems to contradict Paul's insistence that good works are useless in attaining salvation, but the difference is context.

James wrote for Christians who were reducing faith from a living, life-engaging commitment of trust to the mere acceptance of doctrines and consent to the teachings of the church. Yes, they believed God was one not many. So what? That's not faith but merely intellectual indifference. *Sure, I'll believe whatever you tell me to believe because it really doesn't matter to me and will not change my way of living.* That kind of faith makes people seem correct without the bother of showing compassion or enacting justice. Believe the right things but do as you please.

To understand James, look at Isaiah's parable. A man planted his vineyard with only the finest grape vines. Lovingly, he protected and tended them, but to his dismay the vines produced sour grapes unfit to eat or make into wine. How in the world could such a thing happen? As far as I know, with grapevines it could not happen, which is the point – it's unthinkable. But with human beings, it can and does happen. Professed belief in Jesus Christ can lead to tyranny rather than compassion. Professed acceptance of salvation by the grace of God can lead to pride rather than to humble service. How? How can God's forgiveness of sin lead the forgiven to a judgmental spirit? How can followers of Jesus who gave himself draw all of us to God turn and block people from God? How in the world can

compassion produce cruelty, forgiveness generate judgment, and acceptance lead to the exclusion of those deemed not to measure up to the church's standards?

Paul and James proclaim the same gospel but to different situations. You and I live always in a particular time and place where Christ meets us as he met Paul on the road to Damascus, though perhaps less dramatically. Paul was speaking to a situation in which people were judging themselves meritorious and others undeserving. James speaks to a very different situation in which Christians can have what they call faith, but that so-called faith makes no changes in their thinking or living so that Christ's compassion is not put into service to benefit anyone. The poor are blessed from a safe distance but not welcomed, helped, or empowered. Those who have received freely from God expect deference from any to whom they give charity.

Grapevines cannot be hypocrites, but we can – all of us. Someone has described churches as support communities for recovering hypocrites! That's harsh, but there is some truth to it because we are quite capable of self-contradiction, as Paul himself knew painfully well. Why, he wonders, do I mean to do what is right in the eyes of God only to end up having done the very opposite? You see, for Paul salvation was no instant, once-and-done cleansing that left him clean and pure but an ongoing struggle to be transformed daily by the love and mercy of God. James simply reminds us that the struggle is not going well if our belief is making us more self-satisfied than compassionate, more judgmental than understanding, or more given to our own convenience than to ministry and service.

How hard it is for us to shake free from the categories of deserving and undeserving! We fear such freedom and the chaos we imagine it would bring. We think of grace in the false terms of "anything goes," because we wrongly view permissiveness and indifference to evil as the alternatives to the stern rule of reward and punishment.

Let's think instead of being honest – honestly human – before God which, I think, is what both Paul and James want us to become. Trust God as God has come for us in Jesus the Christ who had compassion on the lost and shamed and who gave himself for all of us in this troubled and troubling world. Give in to that trust in God's redemptive love. Start living in that trust and realizing God loves all those other people out there, too. It's not about authority, purity, or merit. It's about trust, compassion, and hope we can share with each other. Amen.