

Reflection for Sunday, September 2, 2018

Based on James 1: 17-27

Offered by: Liz Bowyer

For: The people at Trinity United, Vernon, B.C.

I've been thinking a lot lately about letter writing.

Letter writing has become something of a lost art, hasn't it?

After all, with the advent of technology, who wants to go to the bother of finding paper, pens, envelopes, stamps, and postal codes when you can quickly send off a message via text or e-mail?

Who wants to take the time to do that when it's so much faster to arrange to Facetime or Skype to catch up with family and friends?

Don't get me wrong.

There are many, many advantages to be able to stay connected through technology.

Still, it seems to me there's something very special about sending and receiving good old fashioned 'mail.'

There's something very special when we know someone has gone to the bother of sitting down and giving some thought to what they want to say to us.

There's something very special in knowing that someone has been intentional about writing down something very particular that needs saying, and then gathering pen and paper and doing just that.

This morning's reading from scripture is part of a just such a letter.

It was thought to have been composed by a man called James.

No one is really sure who James was.

Some scholars affirm him as the brother of Jesus or the son of Zebedee.

Others are certain he was one of the first Christian bishops serving in Jerusalem.

Lots of speculation.

The truth is that no one really knows.

Similarly, the community that James writes for is also not entirely certain.

James' letter is addressed to a dispersed community of Christians and again it's unclear exactly who they were or where they were. (1)

What *is* clear from the reading is that they are a dispersed community of Christians who are not only at odds with the world they inhabit, it seems they are at odds with one another.

We might even go so far as to say that they are at risk of being swallowed up by the pain, confusion, chaos, violence, and prevailing inequities and injustices of their context.

We could take that idea one step further.

We could say that the community of dispersed Christians for whom James was writing some 2000 years ago, well, it looks a lot like our own denomination and our own churches where folks find themselves perpetually at odds with one another.

After all, are we, not also at risk of being swallowed up by the pain, confusion, chaos, violence, and prevailing inequities and injustices we meet each and every day in right here in the city of Vernon?

Let's take a little closer look at the text itself to test out that theory.

Here in the reading, James the letter writer, offers a word of advice, 'a toolkit' of a sort for coping with being strangers in a land where religion is not only suspect, but where choosing to self-identify as Christian might not only be isolating, for many Christians in our world it could be life threatening.

If you haven't guessed by now, I like this letter!

It comes 'round every year at this time of the year.

Just as we begin the work of releasing the lazy, hazy days of summer to our memory banks; just as we turn our thoughts to fall start up plans and schedules that will carry us through the autumn days and nights, here comes this reminder from the author of James about our calling as Christians!

Here comes this invitation from James to enter into the arduous work of being the first fruits of God's creatures. (verse 17 paraphrased)

How timely is that for our listening ear, with the season of harvest and Thanksgiving on the horizon!

All that said, saying 'yes' to James' call to being Christian is no small task.

Yet, I believe it to be well worth the effort.

Here's what James would have us be about in that arduous work:

He would have us be about relationships that enhance the development of God's Word being implanted in our midst.

James would have us be intentionally focusing on being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

James would have us be intentionally focused on being more than 'hearers' or recipients' of the good news that God dwells within, between, and among us.

James would have us be attentive to putting a rein on our tongues so as to not deceive our own or anyone else's hearts.

For James, not bringing these intentional practices into our everyday actions renders our religion null and void.

Period.

No doubt, a goodly number of us here this morning might have had time to catch the celebration of life service for Senator John McCain on television yesterday morning or if not the whole service, snippets of it on the news.

As I watched and listened to all those eulogizing the senator, the first thought that popped into my head was how each one had entered into the arduous work of being quick to listen to their own hearts so as to be able to share their thoughts in coherent and meaningful ways.

From Joe Lieberman and Henry Kissinger and former US presidents, George Bush, and Barak Obama, not only was there generational balance, it seemed to me that each one had discerned the arduous task of being slow to speak, and slower still to anger so as to be able to say what it was they needed to say.

The eulogy that most caught my attention however, was of course, that of Senator McCain's daughter, Meghan, the youngest eulogizer and the only woman and relative of the senator.

Just 34 years of age, and in the midst of a deeply visceral place of grief on the loss of her beloved father, for me, Meghan embodied an awesome courage and fiery commitment to what is truly matters. All I could think, was 'you go, girl!' and hopefully there would be clergy there to support her in her grief.

Indeed, like her father, it seems plausible to me that life will likely throw many opportunities Meghan's way to discover what it means to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slower still to anger. Still and all, it was an awesome display of real and visceral grief.

Coming back to this morning's reading from James and how it connects with the life of Trinity United Church, the encouragement to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slower still to anger is not the only encouragement James offers in his letter.

No doubt some of us here would have connected with the letter's encouragement to be 'doers' of the word rather than just 'hearers'. (verse 22)

Not only are many of you passionate about the 'doing' of God's Word right here within and beyond the walls of our church, you are long practiced at the 'doing' of God's work!

And, I, too, am among the first to fully endorse that saying,

'Well done, good and faithful servants. Bravo and well done.'

There is no absolutely no question in my mind that your passion for outreach and your initiatives in this regard are not only breath-taking to behold, they are far reaching in their impact!

Indeed, your efforts to support the last and the least in the wider community, are life-giving and life-changing.

Your generous acts of giving are a key way you self-identify as a Christian community.

Bravo and well done!

Still, as a clergyperson serving in a transitional ministry capacity here at Trinity, I need to return to James' first piece of encouragement to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slower still to anger.

You see, for me, this letter first and foremost stresses the importance of healthy and transparent communication practices.

Being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slower still to anger makes room for curiosity and empathy to take root, for the benefit of the doubt to be given, and for God's Word to be implanted in our own hearts, minds, and bodies.

Being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slower still to anger makes room for understanding to be born and trust to develop.

Being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slower still to anger makes room for assumptions to be let go and healthier communication practices to be learned and practiced.

When it comes right down to it, though, human nature being what it is, and 20% of the people doing 80% of the work at any given time in any given church, how many of us could look in the mirror and see James' call to being Christian embodied there?

How many of us, in taking a quick glance at ourselves in the mirror, could acknowledge to God and ourselves that we are intentional about being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slower yet to anger, especially in the context of church life?

How many of us even have the time or want to take the time to do that self evaluation?

For me, James' first encouragement in the letter from James-to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger and his encouragement to rein in our tongues is worthy not only of our on-going discernment and reflection but also our commitment.

Just as students return to class after a summer's break, just as students make promises to one another of how they will be in relationship, it's my intuition that we, here at Trinity could benefit from the exchanging of such promises in the context of community.

As you may be aware, the board has been consulting with Allison Rennie, Conference Minister for Kamloops Okanagan presbytery about developing a board and a congregational covenant, a set of promises about how we will be in relationship together.

What that will actually look like remains to be fleshed out but in the meantime.

In the meantime, I invite you to bring your curiosity and your receptivity to the idea of promising to be in relationship with each other in ways that are generous rather than stingy.

I invite you to be more attentive to speaking about 'us' rather than about 'them'.

I invite you to be more mindful that each and every one of us here has a burden of some kind or another to bear.

Each and every one of us may be in need of a listening ear rather than a quick fix solution.

In my lived experience, too many churches are full of too many armchair experts who, in fact, don't know the facts behind how some decisions are reached with the well being of all in mind.

And so, it is as we enter into a new season as the very embodiment of 'the first fruits of God's creatures', let's pay closer attention to what comes out of our mouths and how accurately that reflects what we hold dear in our hearts.

Let's put our tongues on pause and take time for that fleeting glance in the mirror.

Let's ask ourselves if what we say to and about one another truly reflects what we hold dear about our church in our hearts.

Maybe even write a note or a letter to someone in the church family you admire or you've been meaning to encourage. You just never know who might appreciate that kind of gesture.

Dear friends of Trinity United Church here in Vernon, my fondest hope that God's word from scripture offered here through the lens of James' letter might become implanted in our hearts paving the way for a spiritually renewed church community to be born here and now this very day. Amen and amen.

The thoughts and ideas here have been composed with these resources in mind:

- (1) Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, HarperCollins Publisher, 1989, The LETTER OF JAMES, INTRODUCTION and Chapter 1, p. 2269-2271
- (2) [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) September 2, 2018, Margaret Aymer's Commentary on James 1:17-27 What does it mean to live as a Christian?
- (3) <https://www.newyorker.com>  
The New Yorker, JOHN MCCAIN'S FUNERAL WAS THE BIGGEST RESISTANCE MEETING YET, by Susan B. Glasser, LETTER FROM TRUMP'S WASHINGTON