

The Church We've Always Dreamed Of (James 3:13-4:3, 7-8)
Rev. Dr. Keith D. Herron, Intentional Interim Minister
First Baptist Church, Jefferson City MO
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost - Proverbs 31:1-31; Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37
September 19, 2021
WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-church-weve-always-dreamed-of

[Inspired this week by Taylor Tipton & Max Ntalamu and their testimony of faith.]

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8, The Message

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it.

You wouldn't think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you'd be asking for what you have no right to. You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way.

So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Evil One and watch him make himself scarce. Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.

When the writer of Hebrews says the word of God is *“living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword,”* it’s an indication of the immense power of God’s word to pierce our carefully placed defenses designed to protect us from knowing how truly broken we are revealing how utterly human we are.

These proverbial words from James are both diagnostic and prescriptive. They are diagnostic in that they take a clinically honest look at the human heart. It helps us to know ourselves with a clarity that’s startling. It unveils our motives, secret or otherwise. Then, James offers us a way out. James, the physician of the heart, writes out a prescription as a balm for our wounds and offers us a treatment plan that leads us to a healthier way of living in the Christian community.

Should we pay attention to James’ words? Absolutely. Will it hurt to do so? Perhaps. Is it worth the risk? Only if we want to move beyond the chaos and confusion of these days.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was Russia’s best-known novelist and historian during the Cold War days. Imprisoned for years, he produced a number of novels based on rural farm life in Russia and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. Although a faithful Russian officer in World War II, he was imprisoned as a political dissident for off-handedly criticizing Joseph Stalin in a letter. While in prison, he wrote secretly of life in a Russian gulag in clear, simple terms.

It was in his writing that he turned the microscope of self-discovery on himself and the pitiful plight of a system that imprisoned men for their ideas. Solzhenitsyn came to some startling conclusions that might help amplify our words from James, *“It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirring of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through all human hearts.”*¹

Our dilemma this morning is how to hear this text.

One way would be to build a firewall around our hearts to close it off from hearing God’s message and consequently fail to see how it speaks to us personally. I suppose that’s a common way of reading the Bible. We put up elaborate defense barriers that prevent the message from landing as a message intended to help us understand the reality of our own living. We fence ourselves off from God’s probing desire to heal us from our faults and habits. We effectively put our fingers in our ears and block God from speaking to us.

The other way to hear this text is to let go of our defenses and let it inform us about the honesty of our struggle. It is to allow the Holy Spirit of God the freedom to speak to us about how our inner world is in such a clash with our sense of direction and the ethics that we utilize in living life.

¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, quoted in Philip Yancey, *Where is God When it Hurts?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977, 51

There are two sets of results. The first is characterized by chaos, anger, selfish ambition and confusion. It's earthly, and unspiritual. Envy and wickedness are evident. Bitterness, false truths and disorder are the signals that the heart has missed the mark.

But a second set of results can also be gained. It is marked by purpose and peacefulness and by a gentleness that's willing to yield to the greater needs of others. It is full of mercy and puts forth the good fruits of the spirit. There's no partiality or hypocrisy. Finally, it results in a harvest of righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace.

Forrester Church, the long-serving pastor of the All Souls Unitarian Church of New York City understood this when he wrote: *"The final war will not be a war between the children of light and the children of darkness. It will be what it's always been: a war within the children of life between the powers of light and darkness that dwell within each of us. Until the powers of light begin to prevail in our own lives, the world will not be safe from us and we shall not be safe from one another or ourselves."*²

Quite a contrast, don't you think? Think it gives us two models of Christian community to set our sights on? Perhaps we should let the words of James create a world that we can dream of and work to make happen here we might label, *"The Church We've Always Dreamed Of."*

What's characterized this church most this year? We've experienced chaos and uncertainty. We have experienced a world of grief and loss for ourselves and it's time now to set a new course for ourselves.

Listen to what James prescribes ...

First, he tells us to go back to the basics. *"Submit yourselves to God."*

Second, he implores us to *"resist the Evil One."*

Third, he says, *"draw near to God, and God will draw near to you."*

Lastly, James reminds us to, *"cleanse your hands and purify your hearts."*

We are warned in these words that the challenge of being a dynamic, healing, healthy community is a challenge that is only possible when we set our hearts and minds on Christ. If we're to create that *"Church We've Always Dreamed Of,"* we must want to be healthy and whole more than anything else. When we do that, we'll see all the possibilities that exist in our midst.

² F. Forrester Church, *The Devil and Dr. Church*, Harper and Row, 1986, 82

Harper Lee reached a turning point when she was a young struggling writer living in New York. She wanted desperately to write and she had moved to perhaps the most invigorating, creative city in the world.

After several years of working for an airline and trying to write in her spare time, she spent Christmas Eve with a family with whom she had grown close. They wanted her to share the evening with them and to spend the night so she could celebrate Christmas morning with them and their two young sons. After the boys had opened all their gifts, the father said to Harper, "We haven't forgotten you. Look on the tree." There on the Christmas tree was an envelope with her name on it. In it was a simple note that read, "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas."

Dumbfounded, she asked, "What does this mean?"

"What it says," she was told.

They assured her it was not some sort of joke. They'd had a good year, saved some money, and thought it was high time "they did something about her."

"What do you mean, 'do something about me'?" she asked.

They said it was plain to anyone who knew her if they would stop to look. They wanted to show their faith in her the best way they knew how. Whether she ever sold a line was immaterial. They wanted to give her a full, fair chance to learn her craft, free from the harassments of a regular job. There were no strings attached. Then they asked her if she would accept their gift with their love.

It took her some time to find her voice. "It's a fantastic gamble. It's such a great risk," she mumbled.

"No, honey. It's not a risk. It's a sure thing," the man replied confidently.³

You see, we never know about the possibilities that are buried deep within us unless we're first willing to look deep into the hearts of all those around us and trust that God is doing something immeasurable with us beyond our wildest hopes and dreams. When we do that, we will think of one another in holy ways and will set those dreams free to become the reality that God wants set loose in the world.

And Jesus wants us to build a church that sees the possibilities in one another. Anyway, that's the church I've always wanted. How about you?

© Dr. Keith D. Herron 2021

³ Adapted from an essay by Harper Lee, "Christmas to Me," originally published in *McCalls*, December 1961