

Sow Thusly

Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:10

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-5).

My grandfather, Elmer, was a Brethren preacher and the Lead Elder at Indian Creek Church of the Brethren from about 1920 thru 1960. He was a preacher like Lynne and I are preachers here at Hatfield - that is, he worked a “real” job that paid him not primarily in heavenly rewards, but in earthly rewards – you know, the kind that can pay the electric bill – yes they had electric back then – in fact I have the original 1924 invoice for putting electric in the house and the barn (it was for less than \$450.00!). So, in addition to being a “free minister,” he was a farmer. From early on I would work with him tending the chickens and milking the cows. Being a farmer is quite physically demanding – carrying feed bags full of chicken feed, hefting full milk cans into a chest cooler, bailing hay, unloading and stacking the hay bales into the barn. When any of these physically demanding “opportunities” arose, my grandfather would say - with a little smile behind his white beard, “It’ll be a good experience”...Hoisting hay bales to the top of the barn in the middle of July - that is to be a good experience...Cleaning out the cow stables and the chicken houses – that is to be a good experience...This is essentially how James begins this letter.

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Testing which produces endurance is the spiritual equivalent to my grandfather’s so-called good experiences.

Unlike some books of the Bible there isn't a lot known about the context of James. Most is theorizing/conjecture based on hints in the text. For example, the book may be named "James" but written by someone else in the tradition of the named "James". Or it could have been a letter written to one of the six James' mentioned in the Bible or even an unmentioned James. What seems most likely is that a later writer took the sayings and sermons of James the brother of Jesus and composed them into the book we have. While scholars who focus on this sort of thing don't all agree on who wrote the book or the letter or the summation, does not detract from being part of God's Word.

So, trying to determine if the book is a letter to a James, or a summation of James' sermons, or written by James himself, the most obvious way may be to construct a general picture of the community to whom the book is addressed to - the reader(s), the audience. When the text begins with the urging, the encouragement, the exhortation to joy in the face of trials we begin to imagine the context of what's going on here. A context in which the first thing in mind is this exhortation towards the benefits gained through suffering.

So, two themes that emerge are to: not pander to the wealthy, and to have faith matched by good works. At the beginning of chapter 3:1 we read "not many of you should become teachers." James then goes on to say that it is nearly impossible to "tame your tongue" (James 3:8). In this context the speakers, the orators were highly regarded, highly esteemed individuals - as with esteemed skills or professions, many people want to be like them. What we see and admire easily becomes what we want to be. Our imagination and desires are shaped through this contact.

In this context where wisdom is demonstrated through rhetoric, through speaking, James warns of the risk to the one who speaks...In the ministry formation class I took for ordination, several students (myself included), discussed their hesitancy to preach noting not being an authority enough to stand up and speak with the authority of a preacher.

Words are difficult and dangerous - especially when they aim to show off our wisdom.

While James doesn't say that no one should stand up and teach, he does warn of the gravity, the seriousness, the importance of this task. Additionally, he states that demonstrated wisdom through acts done in gentleness show wisdom. He writes, "Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility, through the gentleness, that come from wisdom" (James 3:13).

"The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:17-18).

Those who sow seeds or even plant seedlings will tell you that it feels like a bit of a gamble. One places a dead looking roundish bit of a former plant into the ground and wait for the green shoot. Even once the shoot breaks the surface of the ground any number of things, mysterious or obvious, may bring an end to the plant - and at any point in its life. Plucking it from the ground because it was mistaken for a weed - obvious. Or a lot of green plant but almost no actual fruit, for no clear reason.

Though planting or sowing may feel like a gamble, it is actually not that. A gamble is chance. But planting takes skill, knowledge, patience, good observation - in short, one can become better at growing plants. It still is not fully controlled or predictable, but it isn't just luck. Seeds of cucumbers, as well as seeds of peace, are sown with both skill and hope.

Sow thusly and you will raise such and such harvest. Likewise, sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. Sowing thusly is a demonstration of the “wisdom from above” which is “pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” This is how we are to do so.

All this leads to a harvest of righteousness - which sounds good. If I were to say to a child, “when you grow up we hope you work for righteousness” - what would you imagine this including? Likely something more personal - perhaps a piety, plus self-control, plus honesty – that’s a harvest of righteousness on a personal side. And if your thoughts turn public, like what is seen, a harvest of righteousness would be something - more like not being a con artist or drug dealer.

The New Testament was written in Greek. In Greek, the word translated as righteousness can also be translated as justice. Whereas one translation reads: “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness,” one commentary I read indicated it could be translated - “And the fruit of justice is sown in peace among those who make peace”. For most of us, the word justice brings up a much different vision than the word righteousness. Yet, that same Greek word is used in other places is sometimes translated “righteousness” and other times “justice”. Considering this dual translation in the New Testament, what about our present English and our understanding about our personal morality or discipleship (righteousness) and affecting change in the systems, powers, and principalities of racism that are so deeply embedded in our society and church (justice)?

Rev. Aundreia Alexander, of the National Council of Churches, preaching at an International Day of Prayer for Peace service said, “Justice comes from the disruption of false peace” Justice may unsettle, but it makes right. Without this disruption, justice is not possible.

This leads us to James 4:4, “Don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God”?

Anabaptists, of which Church of the Brethren is a part, have historically focused on this separateness from “the world.” This separateness was from their observing the way that “the world” operated - which was often simply other Christians who they felt weren’t taking their faith seriously - but also passages like this, “Don’t you know that friendship with the world means hatred towards God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Brethren called this “non-conformity.” We have a tradition of non-conformity - of being a “peculiar people.”

One tradition of the Brethren – actually of the Anabaptists – was to have a beard with no mustache. Actually, some Mennonites and all Amish still follow that tradition. See, having a mustache was a “sign of the world” ...Well, my Grandfather had a mustache with his beard – a real no, no. He was asked many times, “Why do you have a mustache?” His reply, “I have a full beard!”

While the tradition of non-conformity - separateness from “the world”, can easily become legalistic or self-righteous, what it aims at is justice and righteousness. Following Jesus such that our lives push against the norms and values that prevail - systems of racism, militarism, and materialism.

Sow thusly, sow with gentleness, in peace, resist the devil, purify your hearts. Sow thusly with hope and skill, awaiting the harvest of righteousness and justice. Amen.

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