

Let's just pause there. Because this is really a stunning statement. In the first-century religiously pluralistic society this isn't how anyone would have defined religion. No one thought that religion was about looking after people. People thought religion was about getting right and staying right with God(s). Shrines on every street corner – the temple in Jerusalem – the focus was God getting something from you and you getting something from God in return.

But now James says because of Jesus, because of the cross, it's not that anymore. Because of Jesus that vertical focus – me and God- has become a horizontal focus. I demonstrate my love and devotion to God by loving and being devoted to others.

But the key is that we must have Christ at work in us. How does that happen? It happens when the Word of God finds its way into our hearts and it drives us to be doers of the Word – in its many forms and manifestations.

Sinclair Ferguson says that James' teaching could be distilled down into "Four R's."

- i) Receive the Word of God with meekness of spirit saying "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."
- ii) Reject whatever is ungodly in your heart (God's Word will help us to discern this)
- iii) Reserve or store up the Word of God within you by daily refreshing it in you
- iv) Respond to those you see who are in need

But the order of operations is important. Rush around trying to do good in the world and who knows! Is it good or are you simply working out your own upper middle class white guilt? I'm very suspicious of our best "do goodery". Is it actually good or is it just me making myself feel righteous? "Look at me and all the good I do!" I don't know. That's hard to discern. But that's why we put the Word of God first – it will convict us, it will purify us and it will drive us.

And this teaching is not at all unique to James. He's just saying what Jesus already said.

One day, teaching to a great crowd on a mount, Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:24-27).

When Jesus said, "He who as ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15), he wasn't talking only about listening but obeying. James says, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." Surely if you apply this wisdom into your human relationships, you will be glad you did. But apply this lesson to your relationship with God and you will be blessed.

James says, "Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do."

Funny thing is, Jesus once said, "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them." So, we look to Jesus – let him into your heart by his Word and you will become not only a good listener but in the fullness of time, you will become righteous through and through.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Faith Works: Hearers and Doers"

June 16th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: James 1:19-27

By Rev. Mike Putnam

When you're having an intense conversation with someone or maybe even arguing with someone what do you do while they're talking?

Chances are you're only half listening, right? Because you're busy in your own mind formulating what you're going to say next. Is that true?

And that's natural because what we want most is to be heard. We have a point of view, we have experience, we have an idea, and it's natural to want to be heard. Being heard makes us feel important, it makes us feel validated, and it makes us feel like we matter.

So, when we're having a conversation its natural to be only half listening and to be formulating what we're going to say next. We're slow to the listen and quick to speak.

But this morning James, the brother of Jesus, one of the key leaders of the early church, says we should do the opposite of what comes naturally.

Want to be a master communicator? Want to be a better friend, family member or member of society? Want to buck the trend and change the nature of the discourse? James says it can be done, but if you want to do it, you're going to have to do three things differently. He says, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

That's some very solid advice! If we could actually master that – boy, it would really change the nature of all of your communications. Frankly, it might even change the world.

James is saying that your number one priority when you're communicating with someone is to be "quick to listen." How do you listen in a hurry? I don't know but that's what

you want people to do for you, isn't it? We all want people to be quick to listen to us. We want people to make listening their main priority when I have something to say. We don't want to be interrupted or responded to in haste. We want our conversational counterparts to listen to us deeply.

How do you do that? Well, amongst other things, we must be "slow to speak." In the Greek it actually says be late! If you feel an idea welling up inside, if you have an urge to interject, if you have a tidbit of advice or a comment to make along the way, be late with that.

And just think about your own situation. When you're sharing something with someone what do you want the least? You don't want advice, you don't want comment, you want to be heard.

On this Father's Day, boy is this great advice. Because you know who's the worst at this? Us dads! Because we tend to be problem solvers. We want to fix it and move on. Never mind sharing our feelings and circling around the subject. Let's just fix it and move on. But this morning James says, "Cut it out guys, and be quick to listen."

Because here's a secret I have learned – your significant other doesn't want you to fix her problem for her. She wants you to hear what she is going through, she wants you to respond with empathy and understanding, she wants you to be slow to speak!

Because the reality is that most people don't need advice, they need understanding. Oh, but advice makes us feel good, doesn't it? It makes us feel like we're doing something. It makes us feel like we're experts. It makes us feel a little elevated to give advice.

But when you start giving advice

watch the body language of the person you're talking to. Watch their shoulders drop, their smile disappears, they look at the floor. Because they don't want your advice, they want your ear.

And folks, if you just take this one thought from James this morning and apply it in your real life, your time here this morning will have been well spent. This little tidbit is worth the price of admission this morning!

That's why James says "Everyone should...". You don't need to be a follower of Jesus for this to be good a good idea. Do this one thing – "...be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to become angry," and people will like you more, you'll have fewer problems in your relationships, you'll be a better employee, a better colleague, a better friend, a better spouse and there will be more peace in your world.

But this is hard, isn't it? Why do we want to be quick to speak and slow to listen? Because we want to be right. We want to elevate ourselves. We want to be experts, to be valued and valuable. And so often we do that by speaking not listening. But when we master listening rather than speaking the reality is we become so much more valuable to the other person. When we listen well, rather than speaking well, we risk being transformed so that they too can be transformed.

But see, James isn't just offering this advice so that we can "all get along". There's a divine intention behind what James is saying this morning.

No matter who you are, if you go home and be "quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to become angry," you will be better off. But for followers of Jesus, James isn't done. James gives us his "because." "...be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

When we get angry it's usually because we didn't get our way. When we get

angry it's because we feel dismissed or undervalued. When was the last time you got angry? Was it because someone didn't hear you, someone dismissed you, someone acted like you didn't matter? So often, at the root of our anger, is a desire to be put first.

But God's agenda is not for you to be right but for his righteousness to be in you. God, frankly, couldn't care less if you win the argument – he cares if his children are growing in righteousness.

How do we become righteous? Well, chances are most of us would respond with a list of things we should do. We should be nice, we should try our best, we should do good things. We should follow the rules, give to charity, and pay your taxes.

But that's not what James says will make us righteous. He says we become righteous – the chief goal of God in you - by getting rid of some things. "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

James says we become righteous by getting rid of a few things and accepting one thing. Not by doing things. How do we get rid of filth and evil? By letting the Word of God to dwell in you.

Sinclair Ferguson in his commentary on this passage says, "We are called to 'receive...the implanted Word' in order that we may become 'doers of the Word'. The order must never be reversed; it can never be reversed."

If you think the Bible is a really interesting historical book with some great lessons and stories in it – mostly suited to young children – think again. The Bible is this whole other reality opened up to us, a tool that God has given so that we can know ourselves, know God, and listen to him. But even more, it's accomplishing something in you. It's 'step one' in the life of a believer – "humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you."

The prophet Isaiah says, "So shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

The author of Hebrews says, "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Paul says to Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

Don't underestimate what God's Word is doing. Don't assume it's all about some good lessons and stories and then it's up to us to go ahead and be nice people and make the world a better place. No, scripture is the active ingredient in a Christian's life – it is the power of God at work in you.

But James wants us to find a balance. He says, "Don't merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." God's Word is powerful but it requires a response.

There are so often two types of serious Christians in churches. There are people who are focused on doctrine and dogma – they have the right answers, they can quote scripture and they'll win the Bible trivia game every time. And then there are people who are so focused on being activists. They are involved in this, taking a stand on that, and raising money for this. And James says if only we could bring both together. Because both are essential. You're not a fully formed and mature Christian until you find a balance.

Because God's Word is living and active. And God's Word demands a response. We need to trust the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God to lead us. Where is he leading us? To be right? To be a good listener? To win at the game of life? No, he is leading us to righteousness.

But the first step for followers of

Jesus is to be "Quick to listen and slow to speak." To each other? Sure. That will make a big difference in your life. But first, to be quick to listen to God through his Word. And when God speaks, and through his Word he challenges us, we don't immediately dismiss God or offer an opinion on how we think things ought to be, but we listen and we're slow to speak.... How counter cultural is that? How often to bump into a challenging text and we dismiss it, object to it, offer an opinion on it?

I heard a funny joke the other day – "How do you know a United Church person by looking at them? By all the whiteout in their Bibles." Well, I hope that's not true of us United Church people. We need to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry" when it comes to God's word because God's Word is bound to challenge and upset us even as it encourages and sustains us.

In my experience when the Word of God gets into us it doesn't just do that, it actually sets us in motion. It drives us in a direction we wouldn't have taken on our own.

My own life is an example of that. God set me on fire in faith in a way I had never experienced before. In my mid-twenties God opened up a door to His word and I couldn't get enough of it. I read everything I could get my hands on and eventually I even went on to graduate level studies. This wasn't my life's ambition – this was a work of God.

The Word of God turned my life upside down. And as a result, it didn't simply flavour my living, but started to drive my living in totally different direction. I wasn't simply reading the Bible, but I was doing it. It wasn't my idea, I assure you!

James gives us three examples of the sorts of things we will start to do when we are quick to listen to God's Word. He says, "Religion that the Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."