

Message for September 5, 2021

James 1:19-27

Years ago a book rather surprisingly made it to the best-seller's list; it was Robert Fulghum's "All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten". It is easy to see why this book became such a hit and is in fact still readily available today. I would like to begin today's message by sharing some of Fulghum's insights.

"Most of what I really needed to know about how to live, and what to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom is not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school. These are the things I learned. Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you find them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt someone. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic and hold hands and stick together.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: look.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The golden rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and living. Think of what a better world it would be if we all – the whole world – had cookies and milk at three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are when you go out into the world it is best to hold hands and stick together."

As I have already mentioned, this book is entitled "All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" but it could just as easily be called "Back to Basics" because that is what this book is all about, returning to the wisdom and the lessons that we (hopefully!) learned in childhood. And that in a sense is what this morning's scripture passage is about too, getting back to the basics.

Today's passage is taken from the letter of James. This letter was written by James who was the half-brother of Jesus and one of the most influential and respected leaders of the church in its earliest days. James was usually called "James the Just" because of his strong sense of ethics and morality. The letter written by him bears his name and is most unlike all of the others in the New Testament. James in fact was one of the last letters or books to be included in the Bible and some people, such as the great reformer Martin Luther, argued that it should have never been included in the first place. Luther in fact even wanted James dropped out of the Bible altogether and it's certainly not hard to see why.

Unlike other letters in the New Testament for example, James doesn't talk about Jesus' birth, life, death or resurrection; in fact James only mentions Jesus twice and each time it is only in passing. James isn't interested in abstract theological ideas either such as how salvation is obtained or the meaning of the cross. Instead, James is concerned with one thing and one thing only which was, to him, the most basic and important thing of all: how Christians ought to behave. This is certainly reflected in today's passage.

In today's passage James offered this practical advice. "Everyone should be quick to listen, then slow to speak and slow to become angry". A 'true' Christian, said James, must learn self-discipline, self-control and especially how to control their tongues by not saying the first thing that pops into their minds, especially if it is mean or disrespectful. Indeed James' attitude was really quite simple. Yes, we may be saved by our faith in Christ, but the reality of that faith and what a person truly believes, is revealed by how they behave. As he wrote in another passage:

"What good is it my brothers if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed', but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself if it is not accompanied by actions, is dead."

This then was James' firm belief; that if a person wants to have a real, living, vibrant faith, then the way to achieve it is by getting back to the basics! Don't be so worried about the abstract but instead focus on the practical, the down-to-earth and the here and now. Make your faith a visible reality that the people around you can see and experience. To be more specific, exercise self-

control, be slow to anger and watch what you say. After all it is the things said and done, this day and every day, that either proves that our faith is real or else just makes a mockery of it. To put it another way using 'street language' or slang, "we must walk the talk" or, if we prefer, "put our money where our mouth is".

According to an old folk tale there was once a monk who was known for his sharp tongue and terrible temper. He never had a nice word to say about anyone or anything and the least little thing that irritated him would set off a temper tantrum. No one could ever live up to his standards and one day he got so fed up with everyone else in the monastery that he decided to leave and go live by himself in a little hut in the desert. He was only there for a couple of hours when he accidentally knocked over a jug of water. His response was his usual one; he lost his temper and cursed the jug. Then, a little while later, he knocked the jug over again and this time he really flew into a rage. He screamed at the jug, picked it up, and then hurled it against the wall smashing it to pieces. Within seconds of doing this though, the truth hit him. Everyone else back at the monastery didn't have a problem, he did. It was *his* foul mouth, *his* bad temper and *his* lack of self-control that was the problem. He had thought that he had been such a great Christian by putting up with everyone else, when in reality they had been the real Christians for putting up with him.

Are there ever times in life when we are a bit like that monk? Do we ever consider other people as a burden to be borne when the reality is that they have had to put up with us? What harm have we done and what heartaches have we caused because of our thoughtless comments or fits of temper? Have we ever made a mockery of Christ and our faith, even as we prided ourselves on our being so religious and faithful?

If we wish to be doers and not just hearers of the Word, then we must learn to exercise self-discipline. We must learn to think before we speak, and when in doubt we must learn to keep silent. Indeed as it has been said, we have two ears but only one mouth, and what this means is that we should listen twice as much as we talk!

A poem written by a Ruth Senier puts it this way:

I don't always mean what I say.

I don't always say what I mean.
Sometimes I say what I think will make you like me.
Something witty, clever, cute, entertaining.
Sometimes I say what will keep me out of trouble;
 bend the truth, exaggerate, halve the facts.
Sometimes I say what will make me look good.
Wow'em with words: compliment, praise,
 sound pious, poised and put together.
About my words Lord:
 please check them for truth.

About my words Lord, please check them for truth. This is so very true but it's not enough just to ask God to do this, this is also something that we must strive to do ourselves. And only if we do this, only if we are quick to listen, slow to speak and even slower still to anger, can we be doers and not just listeners of the Word. Only if we do this can we live up to our title and calling; Christians, or as the first Christians called themselves, the People of the Way.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer, on this, the first Sunday of yet another month.

We thank you for the gift of this month just begun, not quite summer and yet not quite autumn either.

We give you thanks for this long holiday weekend and what it celebrates, the gift of labour. We thank you for the work you have given us and the work of others, acknowledging that all too often perhaps, we lose sight of our dependance and reliance upon other people, what they make and the services that they provide.

We thank you this morning for what this weekend signifies for so many people, the end of the summer holiday season. We pray for the well-being and safety of our children and young people as they return to school, even as the pandemic continues. We pray too for the teachers and other staff as they strive to do their jobs in such challenging times.

We thank you this day for this nation in which we live and her aspirations as well, even as we acknowledge that sometimes the reality falls short of our ideals.

We thank you for the peace and security that we have, remembering and praying for all of the places such as Afghanistan where there is so much fear and uncertainty.

We thank you for this part of the world in which we live, remembering and praying for those people who are not as fortunate as ourselves. We especially remember this day the farmers in the West coping with drought, and the people of Louisiana and the Eastern Seaboard coping with the floods and other destruction in the aftermath of the hurricane.

As the pandemic continues, we thank you for the medical system we have that, despite its shortcomings, is still so much better than that of so many of your children who have little if any medical care at all. We pray as well for the staff of our hospitals, so many of whom are feeling worn down and worn out, as even now the Fourth Wave tightens its grip.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen