

“The Uncomfortable Truth”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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James 3:13-44:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Do not speak evil against one another; brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?

Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith

will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us your Word. And as I share what I've wrestled with, may we together consider your message for us today. May the spirit move among us and open our hearts. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

So as we enter into this morning's gospel reading, Jesus and the disciples are on the road again. They have been traveling together and he's been teaching, and preaching, and healing, and talking to the crowds. But things among them seem to be getting a little tense. In the previous chapter of Mark, Jesus told the disciples that he was going to suffer and die, and Peter's reaction was one of fury and anger. Surely this was not the Messiah that he had expected. So Peter rebukes Jesus and, in turn, Jesus rebukes him. In the reading from this morning's chapter, Jesus, once again, states that he is going to suffer and die. And we are told that "the disciples did not understand him and were afraid to ask." Either they can't understand or they don't want to accept what he's saying. So they seem to do what we often do in such cases, they go into denial and simply ignore it. But regardless, Jesus must have sensed that something was amiss. When they arrive in Capernaum, he asks them, "What were you talking about on the way?" And there is total silence. They don't want to tell him. Clearly, they were ignoring what he had just told them. But Jesus, as I said earlier, must have been like most teachers and many moms, he had ears and eyes in the back of his head and he knew exactly what they had been arguing over.

Now, we really don't know what the greatest means. Was it the importance, the smartest, the closest to Jesus, or as children would say, the BFF - the best friend forever - of Jesus? We don't know. But regardless, like a teacher, he turns it into a teachable moment. For it says that "he sat down and called his disciples," just as a rabbi would do, and begins to teach. Now, there are several ways we can interpret the actions of the disciples. One is that they are acting here like they do at other times - they misunderstand, or don't get it, or they're clueless. Or, as I said earlier, they're in denial. Maybe Jesus sensed an unhealthy competition in the air and wanted to take the opportunity to remind them that their call was not to status, but to service. But as I thought about it, I was struck by the fact that the Gospel was written in the many years after the death of Jesus. Even later than the letters from Paul. And we know from Paul that there were tensions among the early leaders. He refers to things that have erupted regarding different leaders in the different places he goes to preach. He is continually trying to bring people together. The Gnostic Gospels speak of Mary and Peter and competitors and, no doubt, John, being referred to as the beloved disciple, might ring of hierarchy and rivalry. So was the church filled with challenges of who's the boss and who's in charge? Had they forgotten the call to be servant leaders?

But then I thought, maybe the disciples aren't as clueless as they are often portrayed. Rather, the Gospel writers say that to insert a moment of teaching, an opportunity to give a message, and in this case a message to early church leaders. They aren't supposed to be rivals. They're supposed to serve together in a common purpose.

Now, that's not to say that rivalries don't have their good side. They can fire up people to do a better job on the field and off the field. They can promote a sense of camaraderie among those on a team and promote school spirit. Take the annual Webster-Kirkwood Turkey Day game. Lots of rivalry going on there, but a lot of good spirit. Jesus isn't saying that you shouldn't do your best or be your best, or to strive to be all you can be. What I do sense, though, is that we are being told sometimes rivalries are not helpful. Jesus calls out an attitude that the individual is more important than the community. He wants them to remember that a servant leader is someone who leads and serves, and serves and leads. That, in essence, the best leaders, are those who work with others and beside others, and not just for their own ends and means.

I think what David read from James touches on similar things. The challenge of dissonant rivalry and power grabbing and the disharmony causes. Listen again to his words, *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness, borne of wisdom. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder. The wisdom from above is first pure and then peaceable, gentle, and willing to yield, full of mercy."* James is aware that our human intentions might either come from the heart, or they may come from selfish ambition.

Jesus was someone who really understood the seduction of power role and status. The Pharisees don't like him challenging their laws. The Romans like their power and the status quo, and they don't like what he's teaching. But with his disciples, he opens his heart and Jesus talks about the children. Scholar David Lose said, *"In the first-century world, children were of no account. Their parents loved them but they had no rights, no influence, no standing. They were utterly dependent and utterly vulnerable."*

So how could caring for a child count as greatness? With his words, Jesus does what he always seems to do. He turns the world upside down. Because the last shall be first is not how the world works, is it? After all, how often do we remember who came in last in Olympic races, or the Boston Marathon? We only tend to remember the winners. The definition that Jesus offers really is counter cultural. He wants us all to imagine that true greatness lies in service, by taking care of those who are the most vulnerable, and those with the least influence or power. The writer of James also asks us to consider, what are our intentions? What is our goal? What are we trying to achieve in terms of greatness? Is it just for our own means and ends? Is it just about me, myself and I? Or does it include others?

James says if we're open to wisdom from above, we will consider others and not just ourselves we will work for the good of all and not just the good of ourselves. So his question challenges them and us to think, *"How are we doing in measuring in our success, our greatness, by what we take in or what we give away, by the influence we have or the service we offer, by accumulating more or sharing what we have?"* I can't speak for you, but I know that this isn't always easy for me. This is very different from our culture, whether then or now. As Jesus grew in stature, I think the disciples seem to fall into the trap of putting themselves ahead of everyone else, of all those people in the crowds. *And we can do the same looking out for ourselves rather than others, trusting less in God for our security than we do our wealth, shutting people out rather than inviting them in. In such times we have to ask ourselves, 'Who might we be willing to step on in order to get where we want to go?' Is that really what we should be doing?* Lose goes on to say, *"What if we imagine that greatness wasn't about power and wealth and fame but instead we measured greatness by how much we share with others, by how much we love others, by how much we serve others? Can you imagine the world if people were regularly trying to outdo each other in their deeds of kindness?"* 2 To do this requires us to view the world differently and to see other differently. Each of us does matter we are told and is loved by God. But everyone is a child of God and matters as well.

Each of us has the power to make a difference. And that came to me as I read this story this week in the Webster-Kirkwood Times about the power of one person to change a situation. The story was about Grace Mann. Grace Mann lives in Glendale. She rides the bus to work and other places. And she's a friend of a family I've known for years. She also has Down Syndrome. I think you may have seen her if you go to Mike Duffy's because she is often a hostess there. Now, Grace lives in Glendale and takes the bus to work at other places she works, too. And she decorates the bus stop that she stands at. It's at the corner of Austin Place and Lockwood. She decorates it with appropriate things like ties on Father's Day and hearts for Valentine's Day and red, white, and blue for national

holidays. And she said when she was asked, "Why do you do this?" She said, "I do it to share love, to offer some smiles, to make a difference." But recently the most recent decorations in the last two months were vandalized and they were marked with a paint can all over them and a flag was stolen from her decorations. That night two women were stopped by the police and asked about it and they denied having any part in it. But then they found in the car the paint can used to make the markings and the flag that had been hanging at the bus stop. It was then they had admitted what they had done. Now, one could easily imagine that Grace would have been upset and negative in her response, but she was not. She went to the hearing where the two young women were required to appear. And there she heard that in order to make amends they would have to do a number of hours of community service. But that wasn't the end of it because after the hearing the two women spoke with Grace and they apologized. And her reaction I think was touching. She said, "They said they were sorry. I now consider both of them friends. I told them my beliefs were about love. I want them to have a second chance. I ask that they help someone with a disability, and I invited them to visit me at work."^{3, 4}

So for Grace, she used it in an opportunity to be a leader, an opportunity to show more love. In fact, I think she lives out the meaning of her name. She is full of grace. She might not have the power status of the CEO of a company, but she does exercise great power, the powers of love and grace. She taught everyone that night more about what it means to be a servant leader, to work not for power but for love.

The story about Jesus and the disciples may reflect tensions and words of challenge, but I think the story also reveals the power of the Good News. For in the midst of the tensions and rivalries of our everyday world, we should remember that the disciples are traveling on the road with Jesus. And even while they argue about who was the greatest, they are still on the road with him and [inaudible] with them on the road to Jerusalem. Even when the disciples appear to misunderstand or ignore what he is saying, Jesus is still with the teaching, talking, loving, trying to reach them. He's still moving toward Jerusalem and all that will happen. And he did it not only for them but for us, too. Jesus doesn't give up on his disciples, not then and doesn't give up on us now. *"For Jesus still offers a different vision of greatness that can lead us to imagine and work toward a whole different world"*⁵ even in the midst of a world impacted by the intimidating powers of violence and fear. We are challenged to remember that there are other kinds of power that are actually greater and stronger, the powers of love and grace, the powers that can heal, the powers that are a way to serve, the power to make a difference. So may we do so each day with love and gratitude for the God from whom all our blessings flow. Amen

1, 2, 5 Quotes from David Lose, A Different Kind of Greatness, September 17, 2018 as quoted from Textweek.com for the reading from the gospel of Mark, Pentecost 18B

3,4 From two articles in the Webster Kirkwood Times, "Grace's Glendale Bus Stop Vandalized, Two Women Arrested," from June 5, 2018 and "Women Get Community Service for Vandalizing Grace's Bus Stop" from September 13, 2018