

September 19, 2021 - Pentecost 17

Luther didn't like James so much.

As a result, *Lutherans* tend to be wary of James.

The chief quibble lies between Luther's central stance that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works -- the things that we do -- and James' assertion that faith without works is dead.

Neither of these positions exists in a vacuum. To be charitable, Luther anticipated *something* ought to visibly arise from one's assurance of salvation as part of receiving the gracious gift of faith from God. If faith didn't inspire you to do anything, you should recognize you're likely missing something. And James, when pressed, probably wouldn't hold fast to the idea that faith is just not enough.

The author of the epistle and the medieval reformer certainly weren't contemporaries. They missed one another

by a good solid millennium and a half. But with the gift of hindsight, we have the good fortune to put them in conversation with one another.

James exhorts readers to “show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

Through a Lutheran lens that may appear bursting full of works-righteousness. Yet throughout this segment of the letter we have in front of us, we should see that plenty attention is given to the motivations from which generous acts are born.

Trying to do right by sheer force of will -- gentleness through gritted teeth – is not the way. It will prove frustrating to seek after this end result by skipping what is necessary to achieve it. Taking shortcuts to achieve glory and accolades for being a nice, wonderful person ... that illustrates motivation in envy. Jealousy of the attention lavished on

others who have given and received acknowledgment and admiration for it.

James and Martin alike will tell you and will tell me: Tell *yourself* the truth.

Be mindful of why it is you do what you do. If it is for selfish gain, it cannot be sustained. You can fool some of the people some of the time, yourself included, but you can only keep up a charade like that for so long. And it will wear you down.

If, on the other hand, we can have faith, you and I will have a much deeper well from which to draw. One which allows the goodness in us to flow abundantly because its source is not ourselves. It is that which *God chooses* to distribute through our imperfect vessels.

And James describes for us what that wisdom which grants us this ability looks like. To help us discern what source we are drawing from. God's wisdom from above is

pure. It doesn't compromise on its integrity. It challenges you and me to do the same.

It is peaceable. It's grounded in true peace. Not mere absence of conflict but deep and abiding respect. It's been said that you will never look into the eyes of someone whom God does not love. If we disagree, we are encouraged to do so with love for one another, as hard as that is. And if we agree to disagree, we can expect to be held accountable. Not to give up advocating for who and for what God loves because we meet resistance. But finding rest and renewal in God's counsel so we keep it up.

God's wisdom is gentle, James tells us, so gentle that it is willing to yield. That's weird. Isn't it? I mean, that's weird to me. That's not how I've often experienced wisdom from above, at least if the above we are talking about is the authority figures and power brokers come across in the course of life. Let me tell you what you need to know, is the

sense I get, so I can feel important. So I don't need to give up any more of my time than I absolutely have to. Don't worry yourself with nuance, just let me lay down for you the simple facts of the matter. Bumper sticker wisdom.

By contrast, God's wisdom will allow plenty of room to be elbowed out. When it's all said and done, I sometimes wish God weren't so gracious in that fashion. Because sinful human beings have a terrible tendency to be attracted to new, shiny things that don't really do a whole lot for us. And God, in infinite wisdom, has apparently figured out that we sometimes need to learn from our own mistakes. No matter how obvious what God has told us should have been. No matter that the wisdom was right there for the taking to save us the heartache. No, God's good word is willing to yield, let the hot take or new fad of the moment have its day in the sun, and let us figure out the hard way that we need

something more solid, more time-tested and true and quietly effective.

For God's wisdom has contended with human foolishness for plenty long. The selfish desire that drives us is as old, James alludes, as Cain and Abel. Much of our contention with one another is about ourselves, not our opponents.

Surely, you have heard that prayer is not really about changing the mind of God, to get God to do what we ask. But it is rather about getting ourselves in line with what God asks. I believe God answers all our prayers but just not with the answers we want God to give us. "No" is an answer. But it's also not the end of the conversation.

Like Brother Martin and James, God and I might seek similar ends but can go after them by different means. In the former case, you can decide for yourself if you think James or Luther has more to offer in their approach to living "the

good life.” In the latter, God and I have certainly always had some different ideas. One difference is that God’s always seem to be right. I, on the other hand, can’t say the same.

But I hope I’m getting closer. I hope you have found yourself, at least here and again, drawing closer to God. Experiencing those “aha!” moments, when something clicks. When it comes together and you get an exciting glimpse of life as God intended it to be. And I hope it left you wanting more. And that that can give you and I something to talk about. Amen.