Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

James 1:19-2:26

29 August 2021

Wholeness

*Greeting & Opening Prayer*:

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. Good morning to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome to all of our guests this morning. We are glad that you are here.

Let us pray: God of peace and reconciliation, we come to you this morning, longing for wholeness. We know that you have met us where we are in all of our brokenness and sin. You have saved us and are in the process of restoring us to our full potential as your image-bearers. You have created us for relationship with you, with each other, and with your good creation. We thank you for how you are reconciling all things to yourself through Jesus. In Jesus’ name. Amen

*Message:*

We are in our second week, walking through the letter of James. Last week, we explored 4 themes in the first 18 verses of the first chapter: God is generous and gracious, so we can ask God for what we are lacking; as followers of Jesus, we are all on our own journey of becoming more like Jesus; we stand firm in the midst of trial and temptation because God is gracious and generous; over time, we develop endurance or patience as we stand firm in Jesus’s way. Unlike the beginning of chapter 1 and its 4 themes, our next large chunk of the book of James focuses on one consistent theme. James spends the next 35 verses, from chapter 1, verse 19 to the end of chapter 2, explaining a complete or whole faith, or put another way, what wholeness or shalom looks like in the life of a Christian or follower of Jesus.

We can trace this story of brokenness all the way back to its roots in the story of the garden in Genesis. Adam and Eve broke their relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation. God had shown them and explained to them the way to maintain the goodness and wholeness of this universe, but Adam and Eve were tempted by their own arrogance, that they knew better than God did. This is the nature of sin in our lives, our tendency or temptation to act as though we know better than God does. The wholeness that God created us for was broken in the garden, leaving all of us with these same arrogant tendencies. Jesus then offers us the way back to wholeness or shalom: that we must die to our own way so that we can commit to Jesus’s way. Then our journey toward wholeness begins, a journey toward aligning our whole self (physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, social, etc.) in allegiance to our true Lord and Savior, Jesus and the transformation that Jesus offers us through the Holy Spirit.

In three interconnected pieces of teaching, James reminds us that a whole faith or pure religion involves all that we are, not merely an acknowledgement of what God has done in Jesus or a short prayer asking for forgiveness and salvation. Whole faith is a dedication of one’s entire life, the good and the bad, the pretty and the ugly, the hope-filled and the hopeless parts of us, the parts that we want to hide and the parts that we reveal. God has created all of us, and in our arrogance and sin, we have broken, distorted, and disfigured who God has created us to be, so our walk with Jesus is a process of becoming more whole, of healing the brokenness, and bringing together all of who we are and what we do under the power and hope of Jesus. Starting in 1:19, James calls this process becoming both hearers **and** doers. We do not look at ourselves in a mirror, seeing all that we are and all that we could become, to only walk away and forget because to do that is to again in our arrogance and shame, to tell God that what God has created and redeemed is not worth it.

In the second piece of teaching starting in chapter 2 verse 1, James shows that partiality or favoritism, treating people based on the stereotypes that we attribute to their style of dress, particular mannerisms, or any other observation, flies in the face of the great commandment that we treat our neighbors as we would want to be treated. We become judges with evil thoughts when we allow our cultural or societal social distinctions to influence how we welcome our neighbors. We are to walk in light of the law of liberty, the law of Christ, the law of love.

Finally, in his third piece of teaching starting in 2:14, James comes to the climax of his argument, that any faith that lacks accompanying works is no faith at all. In fact, his claim is that without fruit, the tree of your faith is dead. In case you missed this theme in the first two segments, James releases the fullness of his argument in verse 19, an echo of the Shema or daily prayer for Jews. “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder.” Faith is more than a daily prayer or a particular memorized piece of scripture. It is one’s whole self, dedicated to the mission and promise of Jesus Christ.

Intermixed then in these three pieces of teaching are several examples of what faith looks like in practice, how the Spirit’s transformation brings fruit in a whole life. We return to the first verse of our scripture reading in James 1:19. Signs of a vibrant and life-giving faith are being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. In a time when we have intentionally or unintentionally learned to tune out those whom we disagree with, James’s encouragement to listen first feels more like an indictment than a suggestion. I struggle to listen and not just because I like to talk. The temptation is to speak before compassion and empathy have fully taken root in my heart. We can speak, but our words must be filled with the grace that comes from listening well. I wonder if James reminds us to slow speech and possible emotional response because anger often distorts who we are and who God is making us into.

Then later in 1:26, we hear a classic Hebrew description of what true works of faith are: to take care of widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world. We should hear resonances of Jesus’s teaching and the Old Testament in this example. James is saying that those who claim to be faithful followers of Jesus will reach out to and find ways to help those on the margins, those left behind by the rest of society.

Then in 2:4, James adds the nuance that strikes me right to the core. When we stereotype other people before we truly listen, we become judges with evil thoughts, naming, criticizing, or labelling others so that we can fortify our own sense of goodness. I must admit that I do this in my words in actions more than I would like, and James reminds us that mercy triumphs over judgment, that mercy will be extended to those who have shown mercy. So, when your thoughts and words and actions express the judgment of your neighbor rather than mercy and love that God has shown toward you, your brokenness shines through all over again. I need God’s mercy as much or more than anyone else, so I try to listen rather than angrily speak, and I extend mercy rather than judgment when I feel justified in laying down my moral or ethical arguments.

One other important point is that some use this passage from James about how our faith is made real in our actions as contrary to Paul saying that we are saved by grace through faith. Thank God that we are recipients of grace, but Paul also in all of his letters tells his audience to live lives worthy of the gospel, to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, and to seek the fruit of the Spirit as measures of God’s transformation. James and Paul are coming to the same point from two sides. For Paul, he continues to tell gentiles about the saving faithfulness of Jesus and wants them to stand firm in their conviction that they do not have to become ethnically Jewish. James might be addressing those who have taken Paul’s teaching and misconstrued it to mean that as long as I affirm this faith, I can maintain my own way without commitment to Jesus, but James says that true commitment bears fruit in love for God and for neighbor.

In James 1:19-2:26, we find out that James’s teachings are not a litmus test to be used as a measure of our neighbor’s faith. These examples and explorations of wholeness, or a life that is fully committed to the mission and promise of Jesus, are meant to invoke reflection and self-awareness. What fruit have been born in your journey of faith? Are you quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger? Are you looking out for the marginalized, the people who have been left out or forgotten? When you welcome your neighbor, are you merciful or judgmental? These questions are not meant to invoke shame, but to remind us that our sins and the sins of this whole world have been swallowed up in the death of Jesus. We are all still works in progress, dependent on the Holy Spirit who draws the best out of us. We are also dependent on each other’s mercy, grace, and love as we journey together in community. Transformation that leads us into greater wholeness is transformation sustained by the love, mercy, and grace of God.

*Closing Prayer*:

God of hope and peace, we look to you and your faithfulness. You never give up on us but pursue us as your broken and hurting children, calling us back to deep and true relationship with you, whole and life-giving relationship. Fill us with your spirit that we would have eyes to see and ears to hear your leading and word for our lives today. Help us to be merciful as you are merciful, to be gracious as you are gracious, to be generous as you are generous, and to be loving as you have loved us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.