

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

James 5:1-20

19 September 2021

Community

Opening Prayer:

Good morning again to any and all guests with us this morning. Good morning also to all of you who are joining us online.

Let us pray: God of life and peace, we ask for your Holy Spirit's leading as we explore your word. We ask for listening ears, open eyes, and receptive hearts. Give us vision for the kind of community that lives out your will and way in this world. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. In Jesus name. Amen

Message:

The letter of James, our companion for the last 5 weeks, is coming to a close this morning. The core of chapter 5 is community, how we participate together in a group of people who are committed to each other and to the way of Jesus. What does a Christian community look like, feel like, sound like, and so on is the undergirding vision of the final chapter.

But first, let's review what James has taught us thus far. In our first week, we explored 4 interconnected themes in the first chapter: because God is gracious and generous with us on each of our journeys of faith, we can ask for what we need, including strength and wisdom to stand in the midst of trial and temptation. Over time, we will form habits of patience and endurance. In

our second week, we looked at a single theme: wholeness. When we submit to the way of Jesus Christ, we surrender all of who we are and what we do, our whole selves. As we walk together in the power of the Holy Spirit, we will become more like Jesus in all parts of our lives.

In our third week, we explored the power of our words. Our tongues can sometimes be the most difficult part of ourselves to surrender to Jesus, so we ask for God's gracious help in shaping us into people whose words are truthful, encouraging, uplifting, and inviting. Last week, we looked at several sides of humility. True humility is supported or undergirded by deep wisdom. A humble person realizes that she cannot have life both ways, meaning that following Jesus does not mean that we will get all that we have ever desired or wanted. True humility reflects long enough on its own thoughts, words, and actions to uncover and continually rid itself of arrogance. James specifically calls out the arrogance of judgment and knowing.

What we see now in the final chapter of the letter is a bringing together of all of these ideas and thoughts into a cohesive summary of encouragement for Christian communities across the Roman Empire. We have no sense today of which communities would have seen these words first. But what a fitting way to end his letter: James reminds Christian communities throughout history that becoming more like Jesus is not a process separate from our friends and neighbors but an experience integral to walking alongside other followers of Jesus in a particular community. Though we may think otherwise, we cannot walk this journey alone or in our own strength. In this moment at this time in this place, we call it Hutterthal Mennonite Church.

When you read the first 6 verses of chapter 5, you might be astounded at the harsh nature of James's words. You might be thinking of last week's message, in which James called out members of these communities for their arrogance. Is not James showing this same arrogance of judgment toward the rich? James seems to be calling out those rich people outside of the

community who are taking advantage of their social and economic power. James is joining in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, calling out those in power, often the larger nations surrounding Israel, for their injustice and ruthlessness. Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah against the neighboring nations of Philistia and Moab: “Wail, O gate; cry O city; melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you!” (Isaiah 14:31a); “Dibon has gone up to the temple, to the high places to weep; over Nebo and Medeba, Moab wails... on the housetops and in the squares, everyone wails and melts in tears (Isaiah 15:2-3).” Or listen to these words from the prophet Ezekiel against Egypt, “Wail over the hordes of Egypt, and send them down, with Egypt and the daughters of majestic nations, to the world below” (Ezekiel 32:18).

James uses these examples in writing his own words against the rich who are persecuting Christians and relentlessly defrauding workers of their wages. In echoes of Jesus’s sermon on the mount, James calls on the rich to truly see what their supposedly beautiful riches have become: rotted, rusted, and moth-eaten evidence against them; their treasure is unable to provide any real sense of security. We are reminded that the state of our hearts, our motivations, our intentions are deeply connected to the treasures that we seek. While some commentators think that the righteous one in verse 6 is a veiled reference to Jesus and his suffering under the Jewish ruling authorities, other commentators think that it might be both Jesus and other members of the community who have been taken before the courts by the rich. Interestingly, James highlights the believers’ faithfulness by their lack of resistance to unjust accusations and to bloodthirsty motives, an indictments of the rich people’s ruthless and malicious intentions. Unlike our example, Jesus, the powerful of this world will find a way to eliminate their enemies or snuff out threats to their power and authority.

James uses his prophetic words against the rich as a stable and encouraging foundation for the rest of the chapter. Because true judgment will come when Jesus returns, then the community must be patient as they weather these trials. God alone will be the avenger and judge. Too often we want to take things into our own hands, to make things right for God, to bring God's kingdom into being on our own terms, but James has already noted for us that only one lawgiver and judge can do so with complete justice, fairness, equity, inclusion, and peace. We must join in the mission and stand firm in the faithfulness of Jesus. Notice too in verse 9 how James immediately corrects one of our tendencies when things are difficult, when times are trying, when God's timing does not seem to be our timing. Too often, we want to blame someone else for our difficulties, so we grumble and complain. James reminds us to wait on God's timing.

The rest of the letter, then, is filled with markers of authentic community. As farmers wait for rain; as the prophets suffered in confidence of God's judgment; and as Job endured the trials of his story, so the Christian community must bear the weight of the world's brokenness and evil working in direct opposition to the forces of death and destruction. In our community, we are compassionate and merciful as God has been with us. We are committed to telling the truth, to letting our words stand as they are, our yes being yes and our no being no, an echo of the taming of the tongue that James had written about in Chapter 3. Simply speak truthfully. Condemnation awaits those who do not tell the truth, both in the human courtroom where these rich accusers already have the upper hand as well as in the divine courtroom, in which God already knows the truth and cannot be swayed by the money or influence of the rich. Our capacity to tell the truth does not change inside or outside the courtroom. As a community, we look to our siblings in the body to not only speak truthfully and honestly and vulnerably with us but to also listen as we do the same so that we can truly care for each other in love and peace.

In verses 13-18, we realize that no matter what we do, prayer fills all of our words and thoughts and actions and programs and worship services and conversations and Sunday school classes. Prayer not only enhances our relationship to our creator, who knows us inside and out, but prayer reminds us that each one of us has needs and concerns and hopes and dreams. Every month, the deacons and I spend intentional time in prayer together, asking God for the needs of this community. It is a rich reminder of how dependent we are on each other and how we find life and hope in bringing our lives and concerns before God. Have you taken time to pray for your friends and neighbors in this Hutterthal community?

The last aspect of the community that James brings before us is the intimacy or deep connection that comes with seasons upon seasons of caring for each other. From verses 16, we confess to each other those moments when we have broken relationship or hurt each other. From verse 15, we offer forgiveness to each other as God has offered us forgiveness. Finally, we become so attuned to the needs and workings of our siblings in this community that we are able to attentively notice when one has wandered from the community as James notes in verse 19. Our compassion and humility again work in our hearts and actions through the power of the Holy Spirit. We seek out the wanderer and gently, with God's wisdom, walk hand in hand back to the body, ideally restoring relationship. Interestingly, in this last verse, it is almost as if we can join God in the salvation of our friends and neighbors and they can join God in our salvation, too. James's greatest encouragement for us is this: we are not working alone; we walk with God, the Holy Spirit, our community, and the global body of believers toward the great renewal and restoration that God has promised in Jesus the Christ, our savior, Lord, and friend.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: God of compassion and mercy, thank you for being patient with us and giving us the strength through the Holy Spirit to be patient with each other. Forgive us as we seek to forgive each other and as we seek the forgiveness of another. Help us to pray in those moments that we do not have words or the energy. Open our ears and our eyes to see how you are leading us as individuals and as a church community. In Jesus' name. Amen.