

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8
Mark 9: 30-37
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
September 23, 2012

This morning the psalm, the passage from the letter of James and the episode recorded by Mark, come together in a wonderful way.

From Psalm 1 we receive a clear and profound image of the benefit of intentional prayer and meditation.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked
Or take the paths where sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;
But their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate
day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water
which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither.

The prophet Jeremiah develops the image further:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust *is* the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when the heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green;
In the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.
(Jer. 17: 7-9)

In the psalm, David contrasts the life of the one who devotes his or her life to the meditation on the Law of Moses to that of “the wicked.” I propose to you that David is not being judgmental here. He is observing the benefits of a life rooted in devotion to God and being nourished by his love given in the Law of Moses in contrast to those who scoff at such a life and prefer bitterness, jealousy, self pity and cynicism

For the most part “wickedness” does not describe a bad and evil person. Wickedness is the outcome of a life rooted in a trust in things that do not endure. So that when the things which we trust to provide security are in place: our jobs, our relationships, our health, our

finances—are solid, we feel happy. Yet when they are threatened we become profoundly fearful; and anxious.

Wickedness is, in a sense, a description of the outward sign of inward spiritual turmoil. In medical terms it is a symptom of a spiritual dis-ease. And as with many illnesses we may try to treat the symptom but we do not address the core problem. It is human nature when we feel anxious to do things that relieve the anxiety. For instance, “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.” Our initial impulse is to do something, *anything*, to push away the tension, pressure and pain of anxiety. So we over eat, we over drink or use other drugs to anesthetize our pain. We drive ourselves harder, we withdraw from people, we blame the world and especially this time of year, *the government*, for our troubles. And what do we get for our efforts?: some relief temporarily, perhaps. We find like minded people who confirm our world view and who don’t challenge us to look at ourselves. But while these strategies may provide some short term security, if we are honest, they do not provide any peace. We become hard and self righteous and we do not understand why life keeps treating us badly.

Jesus did not judge the wicked. He had compassion for them. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd cast around by a ruthless and impersonal wind of circumstance. James speaks to a congregation in the midst of conflict and identifies the age old symptoms of jealousy, envy, and my way or the highway attitudes. He identifies the cause:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?
Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

We want what we do not have and we are jealous and envious. Why them and not me? We may not commit literal murder but behind people’s backs, in emails and other social media we are critical and sabotage people’s reputations. Why, because we are not secure in ourselves and are anxious and fearful. We are not bad people. The wicked are not bad people.

The people who are the poster examples of wickedness are people who have so lost touch with the goodness of God that is part of every human being that they behave as if they have no goodness. But believing that you have no goodness is not the same as being no-good. Our wicked behavior is the outcome of our belief that we *have* no-good and *are* no-good.

When was the last time you, full of love for God and your neighbor and grateful for the gift of life, went out and did or said something hurtful? I don't think it can be done.

This is why David and Jeremiah speak of those who love and trust the Lord and for whom the Lord *is* their trust as *happy and blessed*.

I don't need to tell you that "happy" does not mean light hearted, elated and sunny—at least not all the time. Happy means that when periods of spiritual drought come, by which I mean periods when there is no obvious reward for believing in God, we are not anxious. We trust God and move day by day trusting that God is with us and that sooner or later the rains will come. We are not anxious because the roots of our souls reach deep down into the aquifer of God's Holy Spirit.

For us who call Jesus Christ Savior and Lord, that aquifer is nothing less than the power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It is that deep and sustaining trust that whatever the outward circumstances of our lives, whatever the chaos that surrounds and threatens us, it has been overcome in and through Jesus. So it is that in the midst of anguish and disappointment, in the midst of very real danger and threat to our well being, we experience a simultaneous calm which allows us to remain in the suffering and move through it. We do not lash out. We do not run away. We do not panic. We do not freeze. We follow Jesus one step at a time one day at a time. We trust Jesus when he says, "In this world you have sorrow and trouble. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Jesus' resurrection promises us that there is life on the other side of every sadness, disappointment, and uncertainty. This is the rock of faith that Jesus promises with survive the most violent storm. It is the rock that Jesus sees in Peter when he says "on this rock I will build my church."

So it is, friends that I do not address you simply as individuals, but as a church—a community of faith rooted in the streams of living water. And it is to us as his disciples that Jesus places before us a little child who trusts his world. How do we put deep roots into the living waters of God? Who do we learn to discover that when even our parents get divorced or die or even leave us, we are not abandoned? I suggest to you that it begins when we are children. It begins when we baptize children into the death and resurrection of Jesus. It continues when we love them, walk with them, support their parents, teach them, and welcome them into a community of love that is larger than any human love—a family that is larger than any human family.

And this nurture is only possible because we continually seek our roots deep into the water of life, the sustaining love of God in Jesus Christ. For it is only as we grow that we can help in the growth of our children. Amen.