



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

September 12, 2021 “From the Same Mouth” Rev. David Jones

Last week the Letter of James had very good news for us, that in a world of iniquity, of rich and poor, God sees right through fine or torn clothes to see God’s own, equal children. In a world like ours that has lost sight of that fundamental equality, God--impartial to God’s children--becomes, in practice, partial to the children who are being mistreated. Because that’s the thing about inequality--some will gain from it and some will lose. Some will show up to work with good boots and some will show up with bad ones, through no merit or fault of their own. Since God loves us all and makes us all, and wants justice for us all equally, God actually has to choose her poor children in their struggle for justice against her rich ones. God doesn’t do this because God loves one of her children more than the other; God chooses one over the other because she loves them the same in a world that has made them different. This was the good news James shared with us last week.

But this week we find that James is distressed, he is burdened with this knowledge that there is nothing inherently good or ill about human speech. Because the same mouth can bless and curse, James concludes that the tongue is a restless evil, a deadly poison. He says this to reinforce that not all people should rush forward to become teachers, to do more talking than listening, because as we do, our mouths can mislead us and mislead others. We can do more harm than good. James laments this, he says this “ought not to be.” But unfortunately it rings true, the same people who say peace can nonetheless be pursuing war. The same people who say “we’re all the same” or “we’re equal” may by their actions be keeping our inequality fixed in place.

These past three weeks or so I have found myself distressed about what has been happening in Afghanistan. I sat down to put a sermon to paper yesterday on September 11th. I think last week I had a reprieve from the darkest corners of my mind because of Labor Day. Because the laboring people in this country cannot be blamed for Afghanistan the way the powerful can be. And the working people of Afghanistan cannot be blamed for the terrorism of 9/11. The innocence of the great mass of people on both sides of this war struck me as a light beam from God, piercing through the darkness that has shrouded twenty years of violence. Last week James’ good news, that God chooses such working people in their struggle against the powerful, meant that even as Kabul fell, our hope is realer than our despair because our hopes for peace have the numbers on their side. Just like with achieving equality, there are far more people who will gain from achieving peace than there are those that will lose.

But this week James reminds us of the power of those who oppose peace. Because unfortunately they have tongues too, they can speak and deceive and harm our cause. They can set us back. The terrorists who attacked this country on 9/11 were spurred on by a message of poison. Maybe because it is the 20th anniversary, I found myself seeing more of that footage from the morning of September 11 than I normally would, and I felt myself imagining the fear and anger and panicked grief of that day. I felt myself imagining the stairs that first responders rushed up before the towers came down; I felt myself imagining the sky-scraping windows that were the only escape from suffocating smoke. I felt myself imagining young parents aboard one of those flights, trying to say something, anything, to reassure their frightened child. I felt myself imagining the sorrow of the surviving family of the over 3000 people who were lost.

These feelings yesterday were more familiar than I’d like them to be, because I had been feeling a similar way just a few weeks ago, as I watched the video footage of the airport in Kabul. Twenty years after 9/11, tens of thousands of innocent Afghan civilians have also been killed by deceptive words about peace. (The number of innocent lives lost grows to the 100s of thousands if we also consider the invasion of Iraq). 10 years after the killing of

Osama bin Laden, and nearly 20 years after the Taliban had been prepared to negotiate immediately following the US invasion in 2001, our government and private contractors that had insisted on staying finally left. And within moments of leaving, the country of Afghanistan was reclaimed by the same political faction that held power on 9/11. All along our government and these contractors knew they were waging an unwinnable war, but they hid this from working people, wagging their tongues as a deadly poison of their own, saying there would be peace when they knew there would not be (And we know is true because of the leak of the Afghanistan Papers, which were published by the Washington Post after the newspaper won a three year legal battle with the government).

This is the bad news in James, that opponents of peace have the same power of speech that the advocates for peace have; opponents of peace can mislead young men to attack and to kill 3000 innocent people in the span of a few hours, and they can mislead a nation into senseless forever wars that between our air strikes and the resulting violence of insurgencies killed over 300,000 thousand innocent people. This is what people of faith and goodwill are up against.

The letter of James is a short letter, so I reread it yesterday. This is often overlooked, or it's too narrowly cast as some kind of rebuttal to Paul's insistence in his letter to the Romans that faith saves us. (As we might remember from last week, the letter of James teaches that faith alone is dead, that it must be joined with works to bring faith to life). Traditionally, the letter of James is attributed to the brother of Jesus. This is disputed; for one thing James, like his brother Jesus, spoke Aramaic and was poor, so it is difficult to imagine how he could (or would have wanted to) have received the education to have written this forceful letter in excellent Greek. But it may be that this letter was written by someone posing as James, and perhaps by someone determined to keep James' teachings about Jesus alive. In any case it is one of the older texts included in the New Testament.

And in this letter, where James teaches that faith is completed by works in this world, and where James teaches about the dangers of speech, James is confronting what he sees as a double-mindedness among the early Christians he addresses; he fears that their doubts make them susceptible to powerful speakers. James says that someone who doubts too much is like a wave of the sea, easily driven and tossed by a wind. James' goal with this letter is to equip these early Christians with something solid, something staked to the earth like a tent for refuge.

And this brings James--if we combine this reading with the one from last week--to a message of social and economic justice. How does one know if their faith is righteous and not poisonous? James says you will know when you are quicker to listen than to speak; James says you will know when you care for the orphans and widows of this world. In other words, unlike what one says or professes, which can make endless war behind words of peace, by becoming doers of our faith, we will be blessed. James says "a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

I have been distressed about what has been happening in Afghanistan and what has been happening in this country--about our own double mindedness, grieving those lost on 9/11 but failing to stop the war sooner. This distress might lead to despair if we focus for too long on the violence and deceit of those who wield their power against innocent people.

But distress can also reignite hope. Our ancestor in faith, this author of James, he learned to channel his distress into a power that can overcome dangerous speeches. He learned to channel his distress into action, into the works that make our faith alive and real. If our faith calls us to peace, we can reignite our hopes for peace by doing a peaceful thing. We can, for example, look to our siblings in Springfield working through the Catholic Charities to learn how we can support refugee resettlement efforts locally, regionally, and nationally. We can be stronger than the words that have sown violence by taking the actions that make peace.

We cannot go back and stop the attacks of 9/11 or the invasion of Afghanistan. But we can now put our faith to work. We can search within ourselves and find a loving and generous God, we can feel the same compassion, the same empathy, the same desire for justice of working people here in our country and in Afghanistan. Because God loves all her children equally. Unlike our human speech, her voice is perfect. And her loving voice is implanted within us, and it never stops calling to us. And it is patient. The same divine Creator, the same mouth that spoke us into life, still speaks to us now. Let her voice revive our soul this morning, and then let us seek to do her will together.

Alleluia and amen.