

8/29/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

GREETING...

This morning we'll wrap up our month-long series on the book of James with a hard look at wealth and what we do with it. We've learned that James is a straight-shooting book of wisdom; practical theology. We hope it's offered some solid food for thought about life's questions and decisions.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CELEBRATION AND SERVICE

CALL TO WORSHIP – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Our call to worship this morning is from Psalm 39 and mentions the word “handbreadth”. I wasn't familiar with that word, so I looked it up. It's exactly what it sounds like. It was a measurement in ancient Hebrew times that meant, basically, the width of a man's palm – three or four fingers wide. Of course, it wasn't terribly accurate or precise since each hand is a bit different! But the Psalmist refers to the days of his life as being like a handbreadth in God's economy. Let's join in the reading.

L: Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure.

C: But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.

L: When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin, you consume their wealth like a moth – surely everyone is but a breath.

All: Hear my prayer, Lord, listen to my cry for help.

PRAYER – O Lord, you have promised that you will always hear our prayers and respond to our cries for help. As we gather here this morning, we invoke your presence. We invite you into our midst, even as we acknowledge that you're already here with us – whether or not we invite or recognize you. Move among us, like the wind, with your Holy Spirit. Open our hearts and minds to you, to one another, and to your words of wisdom. Receive and bless our prayers and praises as part of our offering to you this morning. Amen.

Rannie Schmidt was admitted yesterday to the Moundridge hospital where he's being treated for congestive heart failure. You may recall the he and Meribeth live at Bethesda now, so Meribeth is being cared for while Rannie is in the hospital.

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Surrounded by the beauty of your creation, God, we praise you and thank you. We thank you for the generations of faithful who have worshiped you before us and who have passed on the faith through songs, prayers, traditions and lived experiences. As we carry on many of those traditions, we are also grateful for new learnings and new ways of expressing and living out our

faith. We're grateful that your word is dynamic; it holds truths that continue to offer guidance and wisdom for our lives today just as it did when it was first written.

We pray for those grieving losses. We think of Roger and Fern and their family as they adjust to life on this earth without Roger's mother, Linda. She was here, with us for a long time and we praise you, God, for her long life. We pray for others who are near to us who are dealing with losses of loved ones. We pray for the violent loss of life recently in Afghanistan – U.S. service members as well as Afghani people, civilians, or those who have inflicted pain and violence on others... oh God, they are all someone's son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, people made in your image. Each life is a loss, a grief, one who will be missed. With your Spirit of life and love, God, we ask that you would bring comfort, a longing for healing rather than retribution and more violence.

We pray for those who are, even now, in the path of Hurricanes Ida and Nora. These are violent, dangerous storms and we pray for your presence with those caught in the midst of them.

We pray for those who are suffering from physical pain or illness. Be with Rannie and Meribeth as he's in the hospital. We pray, God, for comfort and your peace for both of them as well as for Cindy as she continues to support and care for them as well as for Gene. Help them all to feel your love and know your care in very tangible and meaningful ways. We pray for Debbie Schroeder and her family as they support her in this on-going struggle with melanoma. We pray for relief from pain and that the doctors would have treatment options for her. We pray for Kim Voth as she supports her parents Tim and Jolynn as Tim heals from a broken hip. Give them patience as the healing takes time. We pray for others whose needs you know, God – those whose struggles with on-going illness continue and add stress and anxiety to their lives with unknown futures. Those who've received recent reports or diagnoses and are just learning or waiting to know what this will mean for them – grant courage, assurance of your love and trust in your presence. We pray for those who are sick with covid-19; those here in our community, and beyond. We pray for those who are in the hospitals and especially for those who are caring for them. Sustain them, God. Give them perseverance and wisdom. We pray also for those in nursing homes – residents as well as employees and administrators. Hold them in the palm of your hand, Lord. Give them what they need to keep going and to stay well and safe. Be with Evelyn Matz as she adjusts to new routines and learning and re-learning to know people here at Bethesda.

Be with us now as we continue to worship together. Bless our time spent with one another and worshipping you, God. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. Thank you for hearing our prayers as we offer, together, the prayer that Jesus taught us... Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name...

INTRODUCTION – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Wow! Those are harsh words. They are the fighting words of the prophet. They kind of remind me of Amos.

I'm just relieved that James isn't condemning me. Surely James is condemning the super-rich. Merchants who can travel wherever they want and expect to make money. Huge landowners that can 'forget' to pay the people that harvest their fields.

Surely these words don't condemn me, don't condemn us? They couldn't, could they?

What if they do? I don't feel rich, but on the global scale, our household would earn more per person than about 90% of the world, and our household wealth would probably come out there as well.

To make matters worse, most people in ancient times were just a rung or so above survival. Most of us have resources and creature comforts that even royalty in pre-modern times couldn't have dreamed of.

I know olive oil was a valuable commodity back then. I can make an educated guess that if most of us here liquidated our assets and invested everything we have into olive oil, we would likely be able to buy many times more gallons of olive oil than the rich of James' day.

Maybe you are not convinced. In a bit, we'll see that James' challenging words address arrogance, and arrogance is essentially about thinking that we are in control, and that life revolves around us.

We have the most to learn if we read these words against ourselves.

Before we go on, we will sing "Create in me a clean heart." We will let this be our song of confession.

These words are taken from Psalm 51, attributed to King David. King David was arrogant because of his position of power, thinking rules didn't apply to him, that he could get away with an affair and a murder.

Let's sing, and then we will look more at James to consider whether there is hope for the wealthy.

[SONG: CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART]

HOPE FOR THE WEALTHY

This is our last week with James. I hope James has stretched you and expanded your vision of real authentic faith. Let's take a look again at our passage from James to break down what this is saying.

The verses prior to our passage make clear that the overall theme is arrogance. God stands against the arrogant and gives grace to the humble. Believers must humble themselves and let God lift them up. Arrogance is not just an attitude in the abstract. Arrogance has to do with our relationship to wealth, power, and material security.

James gives warnings to two groups of people, each time with the same phrase "Come now, you who say..." / "Come now, you rich..."

The first group are loudmouth merchants who boast of plans to travel to another city, do business and make money. James doesn't say anything about whether the profit is earned fairly or not. The point seems to be that these merchants take the success of their endeavors for granted and see themselves as fortunate and superior to others.

James gives them a reality check. "Who are you anyway?" "You're just a mist. You are here today, but you can't know what will happen tomorrow. You're like a fly thinking you'll live forever."

These words sting if we consider that ancient people had to live with much more uncertainty than we do. Even more uncertainty than farmers, by the way. There were no insurance policies back then.

If nothing else, maybe a year and a half of Covid has helped to burst our bubble of exceptionalism and being in control. Life is not predictable. Planning is not wrong, but presuming that we can be in a position to plan everything out is deceiving ourselves.

All it takes is a direct lightning strike and you may no longer have a home. You don't know what the next doctor's visit will reveal, whether rains will fall at the right time, or what the markets will do next year.

Then James ups the ante with the second group.

They are elite landowners who have the kind of power that they can get away with paying laborers little or not at all. They look forward to enjoying the wealth they have built up, much like the man in Jesus' parables who decides to build bigger barns (Luke 12:16–21).

James believes that the day of judgment is looming, and characterizes such rich people as livestock that are fattened up for the slaughterhouse. That's a disturbing image!

In spite of its strong words that may seem unique, James' teaching is echoed throughout the Bible.

We heard it in the words of Psalm 39 from the beginning of our service. The psalmist seems to be part of an oppressed group. All he has is the insight that ultimately all humans, from homeless to billionaires have a short span of years like a breath. None can keep the toys we may die with.

Jesus himself had pointed words that we like to skip over while still believe in him and his atoning sacrifice. For example, Matthew 6:19: *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal."*

Or *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money”* (Matt 6:24).

Teachings about low versus high position, and wealth are sprinkled throughout the letter of James. Back in chapter 1, James said: “Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation...” See the reversal?

In chapter 2, James rails against Christian gatherings in which deference is shown to the wealthy member of the community, while ignoring the poor person who shows up. Clearly it was difficult even for first-generation Christians to unlearn the world’s way of evaluating people.

Yet we claim the name of “Christians” from this Jesus who was poor and suffered the ultimate humiliation on the cross. It is sorely incongruent to claim to follow this Jesus and then be biased toward the wealthy. Jesus turns things on their head. It’s why we talk about an upside-down kingdom where the last are first.

I’d summarize the teachings that we find throughout scripture this way:

- Our relationship to wealth is an integral part of how we seek to be faithful to the gospel.
- Human beings are small and transient. We can’t take living forever for granted, or even living with all our needs met for granted.
- Wealth is temporary in nature, and we must stake our identity and self-worth on a better foundation.

WHAT ABOUT US?

So what about us? What do we do with this?

Are we also not like the rich merchants who make business plans and don’t expect unforeseen obstacles? We have less hazards than people in ancient times. We are less likely to be killed by sudden illness. We live in a country where we don’t worry about losing everything to theft or violent conflict. We have insurance policies for most possible material losses.

I also realize that those of us gathered here are not all in the same situation. Some of us have all basic needs met and more, others have financial struggles, maybe struggles you don’t feel free to admit.

Is having wealth wrong?

The Bible at times celebrates wealth, including the wealth of such figures as Abraham, Jacob, David or Job. God calls creation good, and gives us the mandate to work the land and be fruitful.

James does not categorically condemn doing business. But he does say to place all you do under the will and sovereignty of God. If we really did that, maybe that would completely transform the kind of economy we create.

It seems there is another whole set of questions we have to ask about wealth:

1. Does this make me arrogant? Do my profession, my possessions, my savings, my achievements create the ground for a false ego, a sense of identity that pretends I'm better than someone who does not have, an identity that does not rest solidly on the simple fact of being a child of God?
2. Second, is our wealth the result of honest labor, good stewardship of our human intellect and ingenuity, sustainable use of the world's resources? Do we treat all people with dignity and respect, and honoring each person's labor with dignity and fair wages?

I understand that probably none of us here would directly cheat or be unfair to another person who works for us. We aren't guilty in that sense.

The problem is that whether we like it or not, we are part of a global system that oppresses. Even with our good intentions to earn and use money with wisdom, stewardship, and justice, we are still part of this system.

We buy products (such as clothing or electronic devices) that were produced by exploiting natural resources and labor in poor countries. We buy food harvested by underpaid, transitory, and vulnerable migrants.

I wonder if the extreme polarization we feel even before Covid isn't because lots of people feel that something is amiss. Something is wrong. We don't all agree what it is or what to do about it, but we feel afraid. And in our fear, we listen to untrustworthy voices that pull us further apart.

We also may be paradoxically both beneficiaries and victims of the system. Farmers may feel this, as they feel their profit margin constantly squeezed by market pressures and the food industry. You either get big or feel the squeeze.

This system that has lifted the standard of living for millions, but also benefits some countries and some social classes much more than others. The dark side of our global system is that the poor and the disadvantaged are exploited for their labor, while the planet is exploited for its resources and permanently altered.

We are not truly free. We feel unfree in the sense of feeling very limited to do something or step out of this system. The fact that we feel limited, unable to change the system makes it tempting to simply look the other way.

Luke Timothy Johnson reminds us: *“But James tells us that we cannot close our eyes to these realities, that even if we cannot by ourselves change them, somehow we must by our own lives challenge them and that, in our own envy and arrogance, we stand ... under the same judgment of God.”*¹

Shane Claiborne tells the story of a demonstration his community did on Wall Street that they called a Jubilee celebration. With donations they believed to belong to the poor and the homeless, they choreographed a give-away of coins, bills, and food.

A 70-year-old nun named Sister Margaret proclaimed the Jubilee with these powerful words:

*“Some of us have worked on Wall Street, and some of us have slept on Wall Street. We are a community of struggle. Some of us are rich people trying to escape our loneliness. Some of us are poor folks trying to escape the cold. Some of us are addicted to drugs, and others are addicted to money. We are a broken people who need each other and God, for we have come to recognize the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from that mess.... Another world is possible. Another world is necessary. Another world is already here.”*²

SI DIOS QUIERE

James’ teaching certainly doesn’t rule out planning. James encourages us to place all our hopes for the future under the sovereignty and care of God. In our culture, you would hardly ever hear someone say, “if it’s God’s will, we’ll do this or that.” We just assume it will happen anyway.

Maybe presenting ourselves as self-sufficient, hard-working planners who don’t need anything from anyone else is itself a kind of arrogance. Even the expectation that we should be exempt from inconvenience or pain is a sort of invisible and pernicious arrogance in our culture.

In Central America, before saying anything about the future, people often add a phrase like “si Dios quiere” (if God wants) or “primero Dios” (God first). They do this all the time, both church-people and not-church-people. “OK, if God’s willing, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy, *James in The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*. Abingdon Press, 2015, p. 668

² Claiborne, Shane, and Haw, Chris. *Jesus for President*. Zondervan, 2009., p. 312

It was habitual enough that people didn't always mean it. But if you've had experience in another country, you maybe have an idea of how much can go wrong and interrupt plans, even if it's a friend or family-member randomly showing up and delaying you for a few hours. Some unpredictability was more cultural than about poverty, but poverty certainly shaped people's perspective on life.

I'll never forget learning about how much of a market there was for used, thrift, or flea-market items in Honduras. The statement that most stuck with me was this: "The things your people throw away are valuable here."

CONCLUSION

While I don't have great answers, or specific actions to tell you what to do, I offer three challenges:

First, stake your sense of worth in being God's child, Christ's sister or brother, fellow sojourner and member of this community. Don't stake your worth on what you own or achieve. The way to do this is to find prayer practices that help you let go of need to control and embrace your smallness. We may know this in our heads, but it doesn't always sink in.

Second, find small ways within your power to live out an alternative to the present system we live in. Maybe that's buying fair trade, growing your own food, giving away money, doing as much shopping as possible at thrift stores, or some other idea only you can think of.

While I can't give great answers or a simple list of things for you to do, we do have choices. I encourage all of us to do our homework and find the courage to make choices that are unconventional and will make you stand out.

We remember James' warning: if you know a good thing you feel convicted to do and don't act on it, you sin.

Finally, and maybe most importantly. We need to dream.

If we don't have perfect freedom to extricate ourselves from an oppressive system, dreaming is our starting point.

What might the kingdom of God be like? What would it be like to live in the kingdom of God? What would genuine, authentic, Jesus-centered community be like? What kind of world do we dream of for the next generation?

We have a wonderful, supportive community here at Alexanderwohl, and we have room for growth.

This is a heavy topic, so I want to close this time with a prayer for God's mercy.

PRAYER OF ASSURANCE

God of all there is,

We depend on your provision for all that we have. Some of us are rich and lonely. Others have financial struggles and feel ashamed. Many of us are addicted to patterns of high consumption. We don't know how else to go about life.

"We are a broken people who need each other and God, for we have come to recognize that the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from that mess...."

We are a part of a system that enslaves both rich and poor. In your mercy, do not condemn us or shut us out of your kingdom. In your mercy, let us become a part of the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

We believe "another world is possible. Another world is necessary. Another world is already here." Help us to dream of this different kind of world that Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Help us to understand what Jesus was really about and discover his Spirit walking with us.

Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God,

All that we have is yours, and none of it can we keep beyond this life.

If it is your will, we will go about our lives, our plans, and our business.

Help us to be patient as farmers are patient for rain.

Help us to recognize our dependence on you and approach life, paid work, and business with an attitude of humility and service.

Help us to put our faith into practice, and bring our faith to bear on how we earn and use money.

BENEDICTION

May you discover the pure, peace-loving, merciful, and genuine wisdom from heaven.

May you live and make plans in God's will.

May you sow peace that creates a harvest of righteousness.

As you humble yourselves before the Lord, may you experience God lifting you up.

Go in peace.