

Today we resume our reading from the letter written by James. Today we begin the 5th and final chapter. Next week we will finish James by reading the last half of this chapter.

James was written by the brother of Jesus who became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem. Many scholars think that this book was finished by a second author who expanded what was written to reach a wider audience later in the first century.

The last time we looked into James we heard him tell his audience to not worry about tomorrow. To not worry about what you will eat and what you will drink. James says that no one knows what tomorrow will bring but to instead focus on the present. In the message we will be reading today we will hear James expand on this same theme but with an edgier twist.

Read James 5:1-12 (Letarshia)

Rev. Charles Reeb, a United Methodist pastor in Georgia, tells this story from his days in college. He says that when he was in college, he went to a pool party. He remembers it as being tame by college standards for even the parents were home.

However, he says that the dad was a lot of fun. They joked around and laughed and carried on. Later in the evening, they were sitting by the pool and the father asked Charles what his major was in college. Charles said, "religion." The man laughed and said, "yeah, right" to which Charles replied and said, "No, I'm serious. My major is religion."

The man then asked Charles why he was majoring in religion. Charles said he planned to become a pastor after graduation. The man responded and said, "you don't act like any pastor I know. You laugh and joke and have fun. You seem normal."

Charles said that before he left the party though the man said something that he would never forget. The man said this. "I'm in my 50s and you are the first Christian I've ever met that I actually enjoy being around."

Gandhi was once quoted as saying, "I like your Christ. It is the Christians I have a problem with."

Shane Claiborne, social activist and former high school classmate of our own Patricia Hatch, says, "Over the years, Christianity has lost its fascination because it looks less and less like Jesus." Damning words indeed.

Last weekend we were exposed to another act of violence against a group of innocent victims. This time it was worshippers who gathered at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg, PA. A man walked into the synagogue with high powered weapons and opened fire killing 11.

He said that he wanted all Jews to die. He was very agitated by Jewish congregations that were very involved in refugee resettlement and wrote on social media that "Jews were supporting immigrant invaders that want to kill our people." This killer was parroting language which is being used by many Christian and government leaders today. Language which reflects an attitude of scarcity and fixed resources.

Today's reading from James certainly has something to say to all of this. James has some very harsh words for those who gain their financial wealth on the backs of the poor. He says that their riches are rotten for they have defrauded those who labor in the fields.

When I was a kid, I attended Horrell Hill Elementary outside of Columbia, SC. On the playground was a large mound that the kids all ran to for recess. We played a game called "King of the Hill." I'm thinking that this game is one that is probably not allowed to be played on school grounds today. (Teachers here??)

The object of “King of the Hill” was simple. One’s quest was to be the boy on top of the hill. Not sure I remember any girls playing but there may have been some that held their own against the male bravado of the day.

All the other boys would try to push the one boy off the hill so that he could become the new king of the hill. It was a violent and vicious game in which there was one winner and the rest were losers trying to overthrow the winner on top.

But winners and losers are not the world that James envisions. He writes in this passage about being patient and waiting for the Lord to be revealed. To not be consumed by acquiring at the detriment of others. To be compassionate as the Lord is compassionate.

So, what leads a person to want to kill all Jews? What leads a person to be fearful that Jews are wanting to help “those migrants” that want to harm “our people?” It’s an attitude that is the same that drives someone to want to be the king of the hill and push others down along the way. It’s an attitude that there is not enough so I must take what I can and to hell with everyone else and what they want.

But that is not the way laid out by James in our reading. Instead, James gives witness that the way of the Lord is compassion and mercy. The way of the Lord is working for a world where there is justice for all especially for the ones who labor for low wages and for the poor. The way of the Lord is patience rather than needing to acquire everything now.

You may have heard what happened to the man who took out his bigoted anger on the Jewish members of the Tree of Life congregation. He ended up in the hospital for treatment for his wounds. As he continued to spout his vitriol he was cared for by doctors and nurses.

Not just any doctors and nurses. But Jewish doctors and nurses. Jewish doctors and nurses who ignored his insults and treated him as any human patient should be treated.

The events in Pittsburg are sad indeed. Anytime someone carries out violence against another it is a sign of our broken and sinful world. Anytime someone carries out violence while being driven by bigoted fear is a sign of our broken and sinful world. James tells us that anytime someone seeks financial wealth while defrauding others who labor then their acts are sinful.

But we are challenged to live a different kind of life than that. We are challenged to be the ones who treat others fairly. We are challenged to be the ones who stand up for the ones who are on the edges like the migrant, the refugee, the forgotten, the abused, the ill-treated, the Jew or Muslim, the sick and the lame.

We are called to be the ones who do not become fearful that we do not have enough but to be patient and trust in God's time. Indeed, according to James, we are called blessed if we show endurance.

The violence in the synagogue in Pittsburg is pure evil. But may we be the ones who spread faithfulness, love, acceptance, and joy. May we be Christians who live like Christ. AMEN.

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-Reeb, Charley, http://day1.org/8293-charley_reeb_lose_the_cape

-Given: November 4, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)