

18th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.22.24

James 3:13-18, 4:1-3, 7-8

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (420)

When I was very new to ministry, I had a conversation with my next-door neighbor. He has since moved away, and so have I. We were the same age then, which means we're the same age now, but I haven't seen him in about twenty years.

He seemed much older than I was, more worldly. He was a politically-minded person, worked for a think-tank, wrote op-eds for major newspapers. One day he asked me whether my advocacy for religion was because religion is good in terms of social stability or if it was more about its truth claims. I didn't really even understand the question. I certainly didn't understand it well enough to be stunned but it—but I do now.

There are these days all sorts of people advocating religious practice because of what social good it might produce.

The kindest of the lot, if you ask me, are the ones who take into account social science data which suggests people with a religious affiliation tend to be happier, less lonely, healthier, and set up for longer lives. Arthur Brooks is one of these. He advocates for religious practice because it can bear good fruit. He doesn't seem much concerned with which religious practice you might choose. Raised evangelical, a convert to Catholicism, he doesn't speak in advocacy of any particular religion, just of religion in general, if it has some set of practices and some community.

But there are more cynical versions of this, partisans for religious practice because of apparent benefits to the body politic. Social cohesion, an appreciation for good order, a respect for authority, a way of living that's founded in regularity and reliability, a knowing about one's proper role in life: religious practice can foster such social goods as these, given the right religious teaching at the heart of it. Steve Bannon, Peter Thiel, JD Vance, Patrick Deneen speak from this point of view.

There's a cynicism here, if you ask me. Religious practice is less about its appeal to the truth and more about its social utility, if not worldly power and social control. It's an anthropological phenomenon, not a theological one. It's about human constructs, their maneuvering and mastery, not about metaphysical truths.

It was Thomas Hobbes who first made prominent the idea that religion is a wholly human enterprise. Mark Lilla is my guide through this. Reading his book *The Stillborn God*, I'm getting a quick tour of the seminal work of the early moderns, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, all people I'm sure I've read, or I should have read, but I'm not about to now, thank you very much.

Give me the bullet points.

Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan* in 1651, and it changed the conversation. Here, Hobbes asserted that, when man speaks of God, he is actually speaking of himself. Noticing that no other creatures seem to have religious practice as part of their behavioral repertoire, and that humans do seem quite intractably and universally to speak of a metaphysics and organize a practice around it, Hobbes figured it must be something inherent to man.

Lilla, who's fast becoming not only my guide but my friend, points out that this argument is a *non sequitur*, the logical fallacy that occurs when a conclusion is drawn from premises that don't logically imply it. "My dog is named Milo. He likes to sniff faces. I knew a kid in high school named Milo who must also like to sniff faces." To Hobbes, the fact that only human beings show evidence of religious practice means that this phenomenon must find its cause in the human, rather than, say, for example, in the possibility that our Creator finds in people something unique

among all the creatures of His making. In people, given our wondrous minds, God enjoys an access point. In people also, given our powerful appetites that can cause confusion and conflict, of which the Letter of James is very concerned, God appreciates a desperate need on our part for gracious guidance, insight from on high, authority that isn't partial to one side or the other but is omni-partial, loving both of each part of the created order and of the astonishing entirety.

But this *non sequitur* (that only humans practice religion, therefore religion must entire human) changed the conversation. So influential was this text that now religion could be engaged critically as a phenomenon divorced from anything of revelation, knowledge given by revelation, the sort of wisdom that comes from above, as it's called in James, and not merely knowledge developed of human thought. It could be entirely understood as a phenomenal result of human reason, something born out of the human mind speaking of and to and for itself. More cynically, it could, and indeed would, be understood as a phenomenal result of human power, people merely asserting power. By claiming an authority that comes from God, a person has a leg up over others who admit their ideas are just theirs alone, nothing special, cooked up between these temples and not in *the Temple*.

To be fair, there's truth in this—and this might be whence came Hobbes thinking it so. By the 17th century, the church had been in power for so long and in such a way that stifled as much as it fostered. People living amidst parish life were likely held captive by church authority as much as they were made free by its preaching and its parochial care.

And it's for this that Hobbes was condemned for his thinking and *Leviathan* was vilified, that he disrupted that authority, which though was beneficial as much as it was corrupt—beneficial not least to the people who exercised power and authority in the church, pastors, priests, bishops, the pope, which though herein lay the groundwork for corruption.

And what followed, to speak broadly, was a centuries-long disenchantment of politics and public life. The divine right of kings became electoral politics. The mystical conferring and crowning of authority became the ballot box and the peaceful transfer of power.

Sort of. Sometimes. (January 6th.)

Lilla's main point in *The Stillborn God*, I'm guessing anyway since I haven't finished the book, is that the religious impulse in the human is quite a bit stronger than we can be reasoned out of. We wonder why people don't vote in their economic self-interest? We wonder why those living with economic precarity vote for those who bust up labor unions and guarantee tax cuts for billionaires while roads, bridges, schools, and other public goods get drained of funds? Lilla, I

think, will say this is why. There's something of the religious going on here, which is only more reactively powerful now that historic religious faiths are on the wane, the ones that boldly declare their truth claims and also daringly critique them. That impulse, so strong, will find an expression somewhere, and it likely won't be high-minded; it likely will be more base.

(Someone defecated on Nancy Pelosi's desk. Someone else attacked her husband in their home, attacked with a hammer.)

This, of course, presents a pretty good argument about the utility of religion, that if everyone goes back to church then our politics will calm down, which I often think is true. But it also invites a level of cynicism that I abhor, taking the Lord's name in vain, as it were, religious authorities saying what they say not because they are convicted in the truth of it all but because there's political use in it all, not to mention political power and privilege for those who occupy the pulpits: "I don't believe in any of this, and I don't care if you do either. But I need to you to act like you so, sit down, calm down, and be quiet." Such would be the mainline church.

No, what I would say in response to Lilla's uncovering a problem that seems to be getting worse as we go is that the best corrective for bad religion (whether of the inert sort as you could find in the mainline, or of the reactionary as you can find in the unaffiliated churches, mega and backwoods) isn't pointy-headed reason but good religion, something revealed as enduring and true, something that withstands critique from within and from without, something that calls us to greater good and free-er freedom and more abundant life than the cheap consolation of abundantly supplied products widely available in big box stores that tomorrow will be trash but today will amuse, for a minute at least (the poor can be so easily bought) and the far costlier consolation of rage and resentment made political and active and in some cases well-armed.

The book of James is lacking a lot. Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, argued against its inclusion in the biblical canon, which he so audaciously took upon himself to reconfigure. (He took it upon himself, though authorized by God as Luther discerned himself to be.) He argued against it because he saw nothing of Christ in it, no direct mention of Jesus. He called it an epistle of straw, hardly expressing "the nature the Gospel."

(An aside, Jonah Goldberg, a conservative columnist, once quoted from the Letter of James to make his point. He wrote, "As Jesus says in the Letter of James..." a point undermined in that Jesus isn't quoted or even mentioned in this letter. Oops. Someone didn't do the homework. Talk about using religion for purposes of expediency.)

Luther, though, did let it remain and so it is in our Protestant canon, one of the letters that come late in the New Testament. It also might have come late in the days of the earliest church, maybe late in the 1st century or early in the 2nd. It reads to me like the “so what” stage of things. The apostle Paul and the writers of the gospels had wrestled with the new questions this new revelation had unleashed—this new revelation of Christ and him crucified and raised. The church was born, the wrestling became more refined, more of a common language and set of images, and now there were questions of “so what?” What new behavior or practice or social conventions did this new revelation require of its adherents, call forth from its adherents?

The book is a collection of proverbs, akin to the Old Testament book of Proverbs, but with more of nuance, more of grace. There’s also a wondrously subtle understanding of the human, and of human community, which makes the easily programmed and basically motivated and utterly predictable human as imagined by the early moderns look especially dumb. In the Letter of James, we have something more of true substance to work with, the wonder and mystery, the beauty and corruption, of the human being.

The double-minded, the *dipsychos* in Greek, is what this letter is largely meant to address, the mind that knows what it knows through the appetites of embodied living (hunger, greed, self-securing, envy, a grasping after things that you might want only want because your rival also wants them), and the mind that knows what it knows because of some revelation of the divine, wisdom come down from above, wisdom that might even go against the appetite, against one’s self-interest, but which arrives as good and true—a revelation from on high, a revelation from tradition, a revelation from holy writ, time-tested, community-tested, and ever speaking anew.

We see this contrast played out in the gospel lection this morning. Jesus has been walking with his disciples for many weeks now. They have witnessed him having such powerfully good effect wherever he goes, whatever house he enters or person he encounters. More recently they’ve heard him speak of how he is to be betrayed into human hands, and be killed, and three days after being killed, he will rise again. Twice now this gospel remembers him saying this, teaching this, that the world in all its power and *dipsychos* will reject the presence and power of God in its midst, the kingdom of God made manifest, rising with healing in its wings. He has shown and now spoken of how he will stop at nothing, not even his own shameful suffering and death, in order that God’s will of grace and wholeness might be known in the world. And in response to this, the disciples find most compelling the question of which of them is better at being a disciple, which of them is best and closest to glory.

Dipsychos, surrendering to our cravings when something more of self-giving is called for, reverting to our impulses when something more disciplined would do far better.

We have to work for this. We have to cultivate of these competing mindsets the one by which life will abound, and not just as regards ourselves but as regards all—and we have to do it together. If we're each attuned to the possibility of revelation, but we don't tune ourselves in relation to one another, then it is likely that, what I sense as revealed to me, is actually just a rationalization for what I want to do anyway. "God told me to spend freely from the church bank account. God told me to tell you to wash my car after church."

Funny: I hadn't thought of my long-ago neighbor in years. I don't even remember his name. But I remember his question, more and more these days, as more and more it seems are publicly declaring their cynical wish for a religious revival.

One particularly galling example was in an article in *The New York Times* this summer, about Christian conservatives in patriarchal families with many children creating communities in the rural south, hoping for an ambient aesthetics of Christianity to dominate. One of these patriarchs is quoted to have said, "I personally would happily pay high H.O.A. fees to be in a neighborhood where I have to drive by an architecturally significant church every day, and I can hear church bells." Fascinating to me that of such a church he wants simply to "drive by," he wants merely to "hear the church bells." These aesthetics that he loved: he's willing to provide the funds for it all, to pay that sort of cost. But money isn't only what's needed here, it's not even mainly what's needed here. There is the far higher cost, with the far greater benefit, mutual commitment, mutual service. Truly, hear me when I say, money is really not the most important thing. You need people to join the property committee. You need people, indeed, to give themselves to one another, and on Jesus' terms, in mutual service for the good of all.

It's the people of Christ who the make the architecturally significant church worth the effort and who fill it the purpose of housing such gatherings as manifest God's love, Christ's self-giving, the Holy Spirit's restless truth.

So, in case it's not clear by now, I'm not in this pulpit for the sake of social order or political expediency. I'm not here to get you to behave yourselves, except as tempered with the wise discerning about when to misbehave yourselves. I'm here because I have an experience of God which I've tested for the truth of it, I believe in Christ, and him crucified and raised, and I'm convicted that in following in that way, the world will know something of God's ultimate salvation for all. "Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Thanks be to God.