

“A HEALTHY FAITH”

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4; James 1:19-25

January 23, 2022

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James Herriot is the vet in charge at the county fair. He has to measure the height of the ponies so that they get in the right class. He has to examine the pets to make sure they're healthy enough to be in the pet competition. All day long he encounters people who are trying to cheat, to gain an edge for their animal. At the end of the day many of them are gathered in the pub, some of them complaining about the vet who wouldn't let them do this, who slighted their animal. At that moment, James loses patience, accuses them of being liars and cheaters, and sits back down in a huff.

If you're familiar with Herriot of *All Creatures Great and Small* fame, you know that he epitomizes this saying from James, “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Whole episodes are built around this theme of testing the patience of James. It's almost a running gag throughout the series.

Just when you expect that James is going to simmer in his anger for a while this time, a gentleman places a pint before James, and says to everyone quite calmly, “cheaters shouldn't prosper.” The anger from the room seems to disappear. Everyone seems to understand each other.

We live in an angry world that seems more like the day of the fair than the clearing of the air in the pub afterward. We run up against anger nearly every day. Sometimes it is mild, short-lived and quickly forgotten: the honk of the horn behind you because you didn't notice the light had changed; disagreements over chores, disappointments about grades. Less frequent, but more serious is the rage that accompanies betrayals in relationships, denial of opportunities. On a societal level, anger fuels the injustices that divide women and men, rich and poor, young and old, black and white. So much of our world thrives on conquest at the expense of understanding.

Anger may be the biggest impediment to a healthy faith. It builds walls rather than bridges. It keeps us from seeing the whole person or the best of a person that we are angry with. It prevents us from hearing the stories that shape the lives of others.

This is not to say that faith never moves us to anger, but it is an anger born of listening. Compassion for those who suffer injustice can lead to anger on behalf of another. Indignation that reacts against slanderous gossip flows naturally from faith's commitment to truth-telling. Sorting out appropriate anger from simple rage is not always easy.

James secret to nurture a healthy faith begins with being quick to listen, “welcoming with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” It matters what we're hearing and who we're listening to. We need to be faithful hearers of the word.

The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's gospel continues to become more important to me as I go through life. It's Jesus talking, seeming to speak directly to my heart. "Blessed are the poor in heart, those who hunger and mourn, the peacemakers, and the meek" tells me with whom God is hanging out, and therefore whose voices I should be attending to. "Turn the other cheek... Do not judge... and love your enemies" suggest ways we might counter the anger so prevalent around us.

James, of course, emphasizes "doing the word," but it all begins with "hearing the word." Hearing the word speaks to our "interior landscape," nudging us toward the person God calls us to be. Hearing the word is what enables us to look in the mirror and see our true self. Hearing the word shows us what a healthy faith looks like. And hearing the word starts with being quick to listen and slow to speak.

Hearing the word helps with seeing. Hearing the word helps us see past the irrational anger to the need hiding beneath it. Hearing the word helps us see a person with new eyes: to see enemies as friends, to see the poor, disheartened, and oppressed as neighbors, and to see differences as a strength, not a reason for division. We see better when we are listening to the word because our spirit is being transformed. We cannot do the soul work that addresses the many ways in which we fail to reflect God's image without hearing the word.

And yet, doing soul work that doesn't translate into action undermines a healthy faith. It's like people who spend the day in prayer only to continue yelling at the kids when they're done praying. As James writes, it's like looking in a mirror and forgetting who you are when you walk away. Healthy faith acts. The Hebrew word for "listen" and "obey" is the same word. Growing in faith is about getting the outside to match the inside that was transformed in hearing the word.

Healthy faith listens. Healthy faith acts. And healthy faith loves. Paul describes the church in Thessalonica as having a faith that is "growing abundantly." It's no accident that he links this statement with the observation that "the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing." The whole of the law for Jesus and many others can be summed up in love for God and love for neighbor.

So simple, and yet, so easily forgotten when we walk away from the mirror. When we are in church or personal prayer, we see the hungry and feel compassion for them; but when we get off our knees, we don't see them as we go about our day. We fail to act in ways that feed people. We don't look further into the causes of hunger. We don't advocate for the hungry with those who have the power to feed them. Loving the hungry is so much more complicated than praying for the hungry. A healthy faith doesn't rest on a kind sentiment. It looks for a way and acts on it.

The whole of faith can be seen in connecting our love for God with love for neighbor. It asks lots of questions and sometimes stumbles through the answers. Like the rich young ruler, it asks: "And who is my neighbor?" But it doesn't do this in a self-justifying way. A healthy faith really wants to know. A healthy faith imagines all kinds of neighbors. It asks:

“How do I love my neighbor, the earth? How do I love my neighbor, the poor? How do I love my neighbor, the abused and neglected? How do I love my neighbor, the disenfranchised? How do I love my neighbor, the victim of systemic racism?”

A healthy faith gets into the details of life. It wants to know the most loving way to invest money, the most loving way to restore the environment, the most loving way to make peace, and the most loving way advocate for the oppressed. A healthy faith looks to reduce its carbon emissions, to welcome refugees, and to heal specific relationships.

A healthy faith listens, acts, and loves; easy to say, but the work of a lifetime. May God grant us strength, wisdom, and courage for the being and the doing of faith, and may we grow in our love for one another and the world around us. Amen.