

Worship Series: Faithful Living; Sermon Title: Dancing to the Music
James 1:17-27; Exodus 34:5-9; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 7:24-29
Salem United Methodist Church; September 2, 2018
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

We just completed a sermon series on the Beatitudes which are promise statements that we will receive God's blessings when we live our faith. The Epistle of James seems like a good follow-up to the Beatitudes. This small book, only five chapters long, is packed with words of wisdom and ethical statements that outline how our faith is to be an integral part of every aspect of our life.

There once was a village that loved to dance. On Saturday evenings they would gather in their community hall to dance. The hall was decorated with streamers and balloons. There was always cake and punch. People of all ages, children, too, would get on the dance floor. But, all of them had trouble dancing because there was never any music. One couple would be dancing fast; another slower. Each person seemed to be dancing to different rhythms. There was no music with a specific rhythm for them all to hear and then dance. But each Friday they showed up to enjoy each other's company, eat and drink together, and dance in a disorderly fashion. Then one Friday evening a fiddle player showed up and began to play some tunes. Everyone heard the music with its gentle rhythm. They filled the dance floor, moving their feet to the sound of the music. When they heard the music, they acted by dancing.

The letter of James encourages us as followers of Jesus to not just hear the music of God's law, but to get out there and dance to it-to hear it and then act on it. James was writing to a community of believers who were Jewish followers of Jesus and they were not taking their faith in Jesus seriously. They were saying one thing and doing something different. They were not living their faith. Jesus frequently attacks those who claim to believe in God, but don't act ethically. He reminds us in his conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock...And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand."

What words of wisdom does James offer to us in this passage? The first set: God is perfect, generous, and gives perfect gifts. God does not change. We are special to God because God gave birth to us through the word of truth. This word of truth refers to Jesus. We are the first fruits. First fruits are special. A gardener cannot wait for the first vegetables or fruits to ripen. So it is with God. We are given new birth through Jesus and like the gardener, God can't wait for us to ripen. So how do we ripen? This leads us to the second set of wisdom words.

Listen first. Then speak. Good words of advice for all of us. Have you ever caught yourself in a conversation where both were talking and no one was listening to the other? Everyone has something to say, but no one is really listening. Listening to the other, really hearing what the other has to say, is vital to open communication. We often are thinking what we will say while the other is talking. Here are some Proverbs that further speak to listening first and speaking second. "Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent" (Prov. 17:28). "The more talk, the less truth; the wise measure their words" (Prov. 10:19). "Careful words make for a careful life; careless talk may ruin everything" (Prov. 13:3). "Observe the people who always talk before they think-even simpletons are better off than they are" (Prov. 29:20.) And then there is the old adage. We have two ears, but only one mouth, that we may hear more and speak less.

The third set of wisdom sayings is "slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." "Slow to anger" refers to the anger we nurse, and allow to reside in us until it controls

us. Anger can lead to saying and doing things we later regret. It tears down relationships rather than builds them up. Both hasty speech and anger come from inadequate listening. So we are to get rid of all evil thoughts, nasty speech, all the garbage in our lives that doesn't honor God and take it to the dump. Or another way of putting it is get rid of the wax build up in your ears so we can listen to God. Then be humble and allow God to plant seeds of truth, righteousness, and love in us. This is how God saves us. You have to pull the weeds so the good plants have room to grow and produce. Jesus told a parable of about separating the weeds from the wheat, or the bad from the good so the good can thrive (Matthew 13:24).

The next set of wisdom words are some of the most important words in the Bible. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." And this is the theme of the entire letter of James. We are to allow the seeds to grow and produce. This gets back to listening. We have to hear the Word of God before we can know how to live it. How do you hear the Word of God? We offer several ways for us to hear God's Word at Salem. One is in worship. Others are in small groups: Adult Bible Study, Covenant Discipleship Group, Prayer Partners, and this year we are offering Disciple Bible Study again and Jo will be offering her small group on Faith and Science. If you are not hearing the Word of God through one of these, I encourage you to make the time to delve deeper into God's Word so it can transform you to become God's doers in the world. Before we can know how to be doers of the word, we have to know what God's word says to us.

However, James is speaking to those who attend their community of faith and then go out and continue to live the life they have always lived. Hearing the word of God has made no difference in their lives. Others look to us to live by the perfect Word of God. And when we don't, we are called hypocrites. James uses the analogy of looking into a mirror. We look in mirrors, perhaps to admire ourselves, but mostly to see if we are presentable. Is our hair messed up? Do we have dirt on our face? Then we do what it takes to make ourselves more presentable. When we only hear God's word and don't allow it to change us and become part of our lives, then we are like someone who looks in the mirror and forgets that their hair needs combing or their face is filthy. Or another way of putting it, "It goes in one ear and out the other." Or yet another analogy, putting our fingers in our ears while singing, "la, la, la." Some hear and do nothing while still others refuse to hear.

Those who hear and allow the perfect law of God to be written in their hearts, as Jeremiah, stated cannot help but be doers of God's Word. They will not only hear the music, but feel the music in their hearts and their dancing will bless those around them. This is real religion, real faith, when we as followers of Jesus are known for our perfect gifts of generosity, mercy, and acts of justice with the least in our society. Salem is a community of faith that hears and does the Word of God in many ways. One of those ways was through serving a meal to the unemployed and underemployed through the Lord's Table. We are searching for another way to serve some of the poorest in our community. If you have an idea, pass it along.

So hear to the Music or the Word of God. Let it speak to your heart. Hear its rhythm and then dance. Act on the perfect Word of God to bless others. Be both hearers and doers of God's Word.

Questions: What steps do you take to hear the Word of God? What steps do you take to do the Word of God and care for those in need?

Resources: *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James* by Craig Bloomberg; *The Letters of James and Peter* by William Barclay; *Book of James: Practical Wisdom* by Max Lucado

