

JAMES 4: “DON’T HATE THE WORLD!”

(07/18/10)

Scripture Lesson: James 4:1-17

“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” (James 4:4)

This morning we are continuing our Sunday morning study of the Book of James. I know it’s not in good taste to begin a Bible study by criticizing the book and its author, but I am going to do it anyways.

The 4th chapter is not one of my favorite chapters of a book that is turning out to be not one of my favorite books. There are parts of the chapter that I like, that help us in our quest to not only talk the Christian talk, but walk the Christian walk. Let me begin with what I don’t like. Then, hopefully, we can end on a more positive note.

In case you haven’t noticed, I am not a big fan of dualistic thinking. It has caused tremendous suffering, and it may be the single greatest threat to our survival as a planet. It leads to prejudice, discrimination, and fanaticism. It tears apart the fabric of human community. On the other hand, I think it is a normal, natural, and healthy expression of human consciousness, the essence of what it means to be conscious. Let me explain.

Over the billions of years it took life to evolve on this planet and the hundreds of millions of years it took for human beings, for *homo sapiens* to evolve, the single greatest achievement in this process was the acquisition of consciousness. Actually, I don’t think of it as an achievement as much as I do a gift, a gift from God. As the story of Adam and Eve implies, it could not have happened had not God willed it to happen.

Before consciousness emerged from the primal psychic darkness of what the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung calls the collective unconscious, life was lived on a purely instinctual level. No matter what form a creature took, whether it was a single-celled protozoan, a fish, a reptile, a bird, or a mammal, even if the creature were bipedal and looked like a very intelligent ape, the creature’s decisions and actions were unconsciously motivated or driven.

In all of these creatures, from the simplest to the most complex, there was no morality, no sense of right or wrong. Because there was no awareness of the inevitability of death, there was no conscious grasp of time, of how very few moments are entrusted to

us in the space of all eternity. There was a sense of life, of being alive, but no sense of what we might call the meaning of life. The creature would have been very close to God, but the creature would not have known that it was close to God. This is because the creature was not conscious, was not aware of the reality of God, was not conscious or aware of the spiritual dimension of life.

According to the myth of the Fall, when human beings emerged or evolved from the darkness of the collective unconscious, when the prototypical Adam and Eve became conscious, they began to divide the world into opposites. They discovered that you could divide human beings into male and female. Once they discovered this, they created clothes. They learned to differentiate the various types or phyla of animals. According to one of the creation stories in Genesis, they gave the different animals different names.

Because (or after) they ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve learned that there was a difference between obeying and disobeying God. No other creature in the animal kingdom knew this or knows it today. They learned that there is a difference between telling the truth and lying. When Cain killed his brother Abel, they learned about jealousy, about anger, and about murder. No other animal knows what the word “murder” means.

I believe the evolution of consciousness was a blessing, a gift from God. I believe God willed human beings to emerge from a state of primitive unconsciousness because only a conscious being could have an awareness of its creator and have a conscious relationship with its creator. It was God’s will that human beings develop the psychic power of free will, even though the exercise of this free will has led to some really bad choices and an awful lot of suffering for a lot of people.

However, there is a shadow side of this precious gift of consciousness, the human ability to differentiate and dichotomize. When we divide the great Unity of God, the great Unity of life into opposites, as we tend to do when we become conscious, we seem to have a more than marginal propensity to assign a positive value to one of the opposites and a negative value to the other. When a group in power employs this kind of dualistic thinking, the dichotomization becomes entrenched in social, national, or religious policy.

Our tendency to become stuck in our dichotomizations, in dualistic thinking, without rediscovering and grounding our consciousness in the great Unity of God, the

great Unity of life, has caused tremendous suffering, especially for the group that is judged to be inferior. It has also given us a false or distorted picture of reality.

Consciousness divided human beings into men and women. Unfortunately, men decided men were superior and women were inferior, bad, or even evil. I'm sure I don't have to document this tendency in the history of the world's religions right to the present day. When white people divided the races into white and black or white and non-white, they placed a positive value on white and a negative value on black or non-white. They then perceived and, hence, treated the non-white races as inferior. We have done the same with differentiations like right and left and up and down. In the French language, the word for right is *droit*, from which comes the word *adroit*, meaning skillful, while the word for left is *gauche*. I'm sure that none of us wants to be thought of as *gauche*. I'm also sure that we all want to go up rather than down after we die.

In the 4th chapter of this letter James demonstrates this unfortunate type of dualistic and judgmental thinking, a kind of thinking that has permeated the theology of the Christian church throughout the millennia. Heaven is good and earth is bad, evil, or fallen. God is good and human beings are bad, sinful, and evil. Spirit is good and matter is bad. Mind is good and body is bad. Christians are saved and everyone else is damned. Or Catholics are saved and non-Catholics are damned. Or the members of my particular denomination or theological persuasion are saved and all the rest of humanity is damned.

I find this kind of primitive dualistic thinking wrong-headed, overly simplistic, and extremely dangerous. I believe James articulates this type of thinking when he condemns the world. He tells us that friendship with the world is enmity with God. So God, heaven, or the kingdom of heaven is good and this world, this life is bad. He says, "Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

This smacks of the wording of the Prayer of Confession in the older version of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. One of the lines of this prayer, in describing our moral state as human beings, says, "and there is no good in us." God is nothing but good. Human beings are, accordingly, nothing but bad, sinful, and evil. We need to be redeemed, but since there is no good in us we obviously cannot redeem ourselves. We need God to do it for us, which he did through the atoning death of his Son.

I remember when I first ran across this prayer. It happened while I was the pastor of Pilgrim Church somewhere between 1969 and 1972. As a local clergyperson, I was asked to preach at one of the evening chapel services at St. Mark's school. During the service, we all recited or prayed the old prayer of confession. That is, all except me. I decided on the spot that I couldn't say it because I didn't believe it.

I believe that the world is God's creation. Everything that is has been created by God and is a self-expression, an incarnation of God. As is recorded in the first chapter of Genesis, when God discovered what God had created, God experienced it as good.

Not long ago I received a little jolt in a conversation with one of my students at Assumption College. The young woman said that she was trying to the best of her ability to be a good Christian. Actually, she said "Catholic." I find that my Roman Catholic students tend to confuse or combine the two, demonstrating little awareness of the Protestant or Orthodox streams of Christianity. The student then said that the most difficult and demanding part of the Christian walk for her was learning to hate the world.

I was stunned. Here was a beautiful young woman, a deeply sensitive and caring human being who tutors underprivileged children in the Worcester area in her spare time. She is just getting ready to step forth into life. Yet this world, this beautiful world into which she is about to enter as an adult, is perceived as evil, as sinful, as fallen. Instead of loving the world, she actually feels that, as a Christian, she should learn to hate it.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that I found myself drawn to the Eastern religions when I first encountered them in college. According to Hinduism, we can never be separated or alienated from God because God fills both the universe and us. Brahman, the great creative spirit that flows through the universe, also flows through us. This spirit of divinity within ourselves is known as Atman. If you were a Hindu you would know that when you realize on the deepest of experiential levels that Brahman and Atman are one, you are enlightened. How, then, could you love God and hate the world or yourself?

The Buddha teaches that every human being, every living being, every sentient being has a divine nature, a Buddha-nature. When we experience our own Buddha nature, when we find our grounding in it, and when we live our life out of it, we are enlightened. We are then in nirvana. This sounds a lot like the relationship of faith and

works. When we discover the Holy Spirit, the eternal Christ who dwells within us and within all creation, and when we live our lives out of this, we are in the kingdom of God.

This also sounds a lot like what Jesus said in his sermon on “the least of these.” Jesus tells us that whatever we do to our brothers and sisters, even those whom we regard as “the least of these,” we do to him. This implies that Jesus is in or within our brothers and sisters. A little more radical reading would be that our brothers and sisters, like Jesus, are incarnations of God. If this is true, why wouldn’t it apply to little animals as well? Perhaps they, too, have a Buddha-nature. If this is true, why wouldn’t it apply to us? What we do to ourselves, and the feelings we have toward ourselves, we do and have toward Christ. How, then, could we love Christ and hate the world or ourselves?

I disagree with James. I don’t think we should hate the world. This is not what it means to be a Christian. I don’t think that it is wrong to embrace life, even life with all its pleasures. If Jesus ate and drank, if he enjoyed himself at weddings, I don’t think he would begrudge me a couple of shots of single malt Scotch once or twice a week. I think we need to hold the opposites in balance, in a kind of creative tension. Somewhere in our enjoyment of the pleasures of life we cross a line. We lose our sense of connectedness with those who are suffering, those who have so much less than we, and we lose the sense of our deep connectedness with Jesus. But pleasure itself is not bad.

We have two weeks left in this series. Next week I would like to come back to chapter 4 and consider the possibility that I haven’t been totally fair to James in my focus on these few verses. For the next two weeks I would like to explore the sections of the 4th and 5th chapters that contain real gold: James’s teaching about finding the secret of contentment, about experiencing or achieving patience in suffering, and about the healing power of prayer.

For this morning, however, let us try to become conscious of our innate tendency toward dualistic thinking and both the benefits and the suffering that have been caused by this. Then let us commit ourselves to consciously work toward resolving the split of the opposites through the achievement of a higher level of Christ-like consciousness, through their immersion in the great Unity of God.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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