

## ***A Harvest of Righteousness***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 22, 2024  
Text: James 3:13-18

Happy first day of Fall! I've always loved fall, and I know many of you do too. The breathtaking fall foliage is one reason of course. So is the return to comfortable routines focusing back on indoor activities as the weather cools feels cozy. Plus our thoughts can turn toward fun fall celebrations like Halloween and the coming of Thanksgiving with Christmas soon to follow. For me, the turning of the calendar page to September always makes me think not only of the change in season from summer to fall, but even more so about the relentless forward momentum of life. Another school year begins with the yellow school busses rumbling along the roads at predictable times. Another World Series looms with people whining about either the Red Sox or the Yankees or both. Another Patriots season clogs up television and the Monday morning quarterbacking becomes incessant. Talk here at the church turns in earnest to the upcoming Christmas Bazaars as our planning in the church turns toward things like stewardship campaigns and the Christmas season. In other words, as fall gently slips into place, we feel at our backs the relentless wind of time moving forward, of our own aging, of life continuing on each day, whether we're ready or not. It's not an unpleasant sensation, this anticipation of the ever flowing current of time through our lives. Rather, Fall is a moment when the

beauty of “time’s ever flowing stream”<sup>1</sup> becomes visible. We are able once again to count it among our blessings.

Fall is the time of year, of course, when our thoughts also turn to harvests. We decorate our homes with the symbols of the harvest, like cornstalks and hay, mums in autumn’s colors and pumpkins of all shapes, sizes and colors. In our area we celebrate the opening of Clyde’s Cider Mill, well most of us do. The nearby neighbors not so much. 😊 In stores and restaurants all things pumpkin appear in abundance, along with Halloween candy. Our thoughts turn to Thanksgiving plans for travel or hosting. The theme of harvest permeates our lives, even if we don’t really notice. I do think fall in New England takes on a particularly unique quality. We know folks come from all over the world to peep at our leaves, to check out Plymouth Rock and Plymouth Plantation and all the other assorted tourist spots. Here in New England there’s a very real way in which we *are* fall personified.

This morning, though, I’d like to invite us to think a little more about this whole notion of “harvest.” What is its connection to our faith? What is James talking about in the text we read this morning when he writes about a harvest of righteousness? What could that mean? Righteousness and harvest are not words we would usually associate with each other, but James does, quite intentionally. The lesson he teaches us in doing so is both profound and rich. But, before we embark on unpacking that, we need to take a moment to understand a few things about this little book in the New Testament canon.

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<sup>1</sup> “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” *Worship and Rejoice Hymnal*, ©Public Domain, #84

As it turns out, the book of James has a very controversial history in relation to its inclusion in the canon. First of all, as James states himself in verse 1, chapter 1, this book is actually a letter to what he calls “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” Biblical scholars consider this a symbolic reference to fledgling churches as a “new Israel” which is scattered either geographically or symbolically.<sup>2</sup> This letter of James was in wide usage in all those early churches yet it still experienced slow acceptance into the evolving formal canon, or collection, of Scriptures officially accepted by the church. This matter was largely settled once it was included in Bishop Athanasius’ canonical list in 367 CE. That is it was settled until the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther reformatted the Bible and moved James, along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, to the end of the New Testament because he thought it did not contain enough of what he thought of as “essential elements of the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> An odd conclusion to say the least.

The author of the book of James is uncertain as is the reason it was written in the first place. It has always been attributed to James, the brother of Jesus, but recent scholarship has been unable to confirm this. The sophistication of the writing style would seem to be beyond the capabilities of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Galilean laborer but no one can really be sure. The most likely scenario, scholars agree, is that it was written by someone who was a protégé or student of James who was so struck by the teachings that he felt the need to write them down so they could be shared

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<sup>2</sup> Notes on James in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 2120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2119.

more broadly. When it was written down is equally a mystery, but various literary dating methods place it in the second half of the first century CE, most likely 60 CE or later.

Essentially what all this tells us, and why I am taking the time to set this context for you, is that this letter was very important and widely known in the first century as Christianity was being born and spread across the Mediterranean world at that time. The thing about James' letter is that it's very different from Paul's letters and what Paul was teaching about Jesus. You will remember that Paul singlehandedly spread the gospel throughout as much of the Roman Empire as he as a Roman citizen could travel to. Objections to James came from the group of church leaders in the 4<sup>th</sup> century who believed that Paul's letters, what we think of as the Epistles like Romans, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, etc., were the best and only reliable summary of Jesus' teachings. We need to remember that Paul's letters were written down before the Gospels were. Among other things this means Paul did not have access to the disciples' accounts of Jesus life and teachings which eventually became the Gospels. Still, these early church leaders trusted Paul more than they trusted Jesus' original disciples! And this in spite of the fact that Paul had never met Jesus personally while he was alive. In fact, he had been one of the lead persecutors of Jesus and the disciples before his personal encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. The objections to including James' letter along with Paul's many letters in the canon of Scripture came down to one point of difference between Paul's teachings and what James says. James believed that faith without actions meant nothing. In other words, faith was expressed through actions of love, compassion,

kindness, etc. Paul, on the other hand, taught that faith alone was the key to salvation. You had to confess Jesus as the Risen Savior and in the atoning act of Jesus' death on the cross in order to call yourself a Christian. Period. Easy to see why the disagreement arose.

The interesting thing, though, is that when you read each of them separately – in other words not in direct comparison with each other – they're really saying the same thing in different ways. James taught that just professing faith without doing anything tangible to benefit others was worthless and pointless. Paul taught that professing faith on its own was enough. However, Paul did believe that once faith had been professed and claimed that the person would be transformed by that faith into a person who would naturally do good things for the benefit of others. So, they did both believe that acting as a follower of Jesus – a Christian – was a natural outcome of faith. Paul believed that the transformative potential of faith would change human behavior. James, on the other hand, was more skeptical about human nature. He thought it was entirely likely that folks would be perfectly happy to profess their faith and still continue on with behavior that was decidedly unchristian. Put another way, James believed that faith and action were two sides of the same coin. You could not be a follower of Jesus and still be a jerk. You could not claim to know Jesus as your redeemer and walk right past the poor people starving in your neighborhood. You could not profess your faith in Jesus and pretend you don't see all the suffering in the world. You could not talk about Jesus and then use that same voice to lie or cheat others. Faith in Jesus is central for James. No doubt of that. But for James, it cannot ever be separated from

action. If you believe in Jesus, right action is just as important – actually he would say more important – than right belief.

So what is this harvest of righteousness James writes about in today's text and what does it have to do with us? Interestingly, he begins with a focus on wisdom – or the attainment of knowledge and understanding. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” he writes. Then he continues, “show by your good life that your good works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” In other words, if you know Jesus – if you have received and internalized the wisdom that comes from knowing Jesus – your good works will come from that knowledge. Faith and action go hand in hand. All the time. Not just when you're thinking about it. Not just when you remember. Not just when it's easy. All the time. Every day. James then explains that wisdom that comes “from above” is very different from the wisdom which comes from the human heart. He writes, “if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts” do not boast about this and thereby distort the truth of Jesus. He says, “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.” What James is doing here is inviting us to always engage in an intentional act of introspection, reflecting on where our actions originate. Are they coming from God as the teachings of God's Son Jesus take root in our hearts? Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to enliven our faith through our actions and our thinking every day? Or not. Just how are we to do this introspection? How are we to know how to measure the faithfulness of our own thoughts, the righteousness of our own actions?

Here is your measuring rod, James says: “Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceful, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” Notice James’ choice of words here. Pure. Peaceful. Gentle. Willing to yield. Mercy. Good fruits. So, for us, as we engage in a prayerful act of reflection on ourselves in any given moment, these are the words we examine ourselves with. Is what we are doing pure – uncontaminated by anger or fear or guilt? Will what we are doing lead to peacefulness for ourselves and for the others we are interacting with? Are we behaving in a gentle way? Are we able to admit, to yield, to another about something when circumstances warrant it? Are we merciful in our interactions with others, whether we know them or not? And then, echoing Paul himself who writes at length about the “fruits of the Spirit,” James encourages us to consider whether or not our actions – the fruits of our faith – are good. Or are they harmful?

That is THE question, isn’t it. Too often Christians have been very good at pointing out the sinfulness they see in others and condemning them for it. That, James says, is never going to achieve the results you are looking for. To bring people to Jesus, he says, requires an internal peacefulness which can only come from knowing God and welcoming Jesus into your own heart. It is this deep peace which overcomes all understanding which leads to the kind of faith that reveals itself all the time through the actions of the one professing it. This is the harvest of righteousness James speaks about and invites us into celebrating with him. If you truly have faith in Jesus, the Risen Christ, then you will act toward others as Jesus did always. You will always make visible in your life what Jesus himself taught was the most

important of the commandments: Love God with all that you are and all that you have; Love the other as yourself. James reminds us that it is literally impossible to do one without the other.

So my invitation to you today is to invest a little time in James' suggested self-examination and see where you rate on his "harvest of righteousness" scale. Would your harvest basket be too heavy to lift because the righteousness is overflowing? Or is it more like half full? If that's the case, what would it take to fill your harvest basket up to the top? How can the church, our church, be a part of your quest to fill up your basket? Stuff to think about, huh. Well, I can't think of a better place or a better time to do it than right here and right now. Welcome Fall! We at UCC Westerly are ready to fill our baskets! We hope you are too. Amen.