

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 20, 2015
Pentecost 17
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 54
James 3:16 -- 4:6
Mark 9:30-37

On more than one occasion during his long ministry, John Wesley was asked, “What is a Christian?”

Although his responses were tailored to each individual situation, Wesley’s answer to that question always included this important theme. Wesley would answer, “one is a Christian who is not merely so *outwardly*, in things of external observance; but one is a Christian who is so *inwardly*, whose thoughts and motives and attitudes are guided and controlled by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.”

This is part of what Wesley meant when he said that Christianity is a “religion of the heart.” The Christian life is more than just avoiding evil and doing good. The Christian life is a process where the inner dispositions of the heart are touched by God’s grace, so much so that motives and desires shift from being centered on the self and become centered on God. True Christianity, said Wesley, is nothing more than the pure love of God reigning in the human heart.

It is clear that Wesley read the letter of James, and understood its importance for the life of faith. James is writing to some folks who were having some problems. There was quarreling, strife, contention in their midst.

James says, “The cause of your problems is not external to yourselves. The cause of your problems is *within*. It lies deep in the motives of your hearts.” The problem, says James, is that the attitudes and dispositions of your hearts are misplaced. The focus of your lives is on yourselves, on your own selfish interests.

James even uses militaristic metaphors to describe the seriousness of this inner struggle. There is an entire “army” of evil desires within us, waging a serious battle to determine the focus of our lives. Our normal human inclination is to curve life in upon ourselves, to place self at the center of life.

James says, anytime you have a person all wrapped up in himself or herself, it makes for a very small package.

We need look no further than the disciples in our Gospel lesson for an example of this. Jesus is teaching them, trying to tell them that he is on the way to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. But the disciples don’t hear what he is saying, because they are too busy arguing about which of them is the greatest. They are filled with pride, jealousy, selfish ambition. They are full of themselves, and it is a group of very small packages. In trying to make themselves great, they reveal how truly small they are.

So Jesus instructs them, and tells them that ironically enough, the way to greatness is through humility. It requires an overhaul of our inward motives, a change in the dispositions of our hearts. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the internal warfare in our hearts can be won, and we can become servants whose sole aim is to please God and do God's will.

As we return to James, I think that it is possible for us to cut right to the chase this morning, and to let his words challenge each of us. The heart of many of our problems, James says, is our misplaced motives. And so if James were writing to us this morning, one of the challenges he might offer up to us is this.

James would say to the Christians at Epworth Chapel on the Green:

Examine the most pressing problem or source of conflict in your life right now.

As you do, take a long and serious look at the motives deep within your heart.

Place them under the spotlight of the Spirit's refining love. Pray for guidance.

And act accordingly.

Wesley was right. Christianity is a religion of the heart. It's about the work of the Holy Spirit changing our hearts, our attitudes, and our inner dispositions.

It's about God's transforming grace working deep within us, winning the war that is within us.

That grace doesn't come to us in a vacuum. It comes to us through a variety of means and practices ordained by God to help us. One of those means is the Holy Eucharist.

Come to the Table today with faith. Allow the Spirit to speak your heart. Seek the wisdom that is from above, the wisdom that is pure and peace loving, full of mercy and good deeds. Then go forth with a servant's heart, ready to be used by God to make a difference in the lives of others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.