

“Human Beings Like Us”

Sermon Preached by The Rev. William H. Critzman

West End Collegiate Church | September 30, 2018

Scripture References: Mark 9:38-42 & James 5:13-20

Hello West End. How good it is to be here with you today. What a long journey some of us have already been on to arrive at this day; what an even longer path to God and God’s justice many of us embark upon together now. I give thanks to God for you, and for the opportunities of each new day. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. Let us pray. God who goes by many names, we remember your promise to always be with us and to lead us forward into the reign of God for us and for all people. May our hearts be open to your will and may all that we say and do be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Are any among you suffering? Are any of you cheerful? Are any of you sick? These are the first questions I ask, the way a nurse takes a temperature or checks our vitals. Truth is, I have so many questions for you, good people of West End Church. So many questions that I want to ask as a means of introduction—to get know who you, to know where you are, and to hear your voice. You’ll have questions for me too, as I can imagine you want to know who I am and how it is that I come to join with you in the work of ministry of this church for our world. This is a time when there ought to be these sorts of questions; this is a time when our answers may be genuine and honest, and also open and vulnerable. The writer Richard Stafford begins his poem “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” with these words:

If you don’t know the kind of person I am
and I don’t know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star

We who have come to follow our living, still speaking, all-changing God can take no such chances. There are patterns others have made in the world that we must right. There are people—brothers and sisters in Christ—whom we must know more deeply. There’s a clarity of the gospel’s light—a star—that guides us, if only we seek to follow. As disciples, we begin by asking questions. Where are we going? Who’s coming with us? Do we have all that we need? Have we missed anything? In doing so, we set our eyes on heavenly places and begin by getting to know one another, one another in all our humanity as broken as we are, as blessed as we are. Friends, I can’t think of anything more exciting. Are your hearts, like mine, glad at this task? Are any among you hopeful?

Now full disclosure, the questions I ask you this morning are not mine alone, they’re part of a cannon that is all of ours. As you heard Priscilla first read them a few moments ago, these questions come from the Epistle of James, epistle being a fancy, churchy word for letter. These words, these questions, come from the final section of that letter, the epistolary conclusion, the valediction to the twelve tribes in dispersion to whom James is writing. It’s interesting to think of how questions can both be an introduction and a close; it’s also curious to think of a how a single letter can have so wide of an audience. As interesting as either of these questions may be, they’re not the star we’re going to follow today.

Rather, what seems most pressing for us to hear from James’ letter is the sincerity, the genuine interest the writer has for his audience. James is writing these questions as a matter of concern and of civility, yes, but in truth they’re a bit obvious, don’t you think? With questions like these, how could he not already know the answers? He’s got to know that some are indeed

suffering—these are the twelve tribes living in diaspora. Surely someone among the multitude of recipients has a cough that won't subside or a new diagnosis that's sadly so much worse than we had hoped. He knows there are people who are sick, people who are suffering, and even people who are cheerful, and yet he still asks the question. Instead of telling them what he knows, he asks questions to find out what they know. Questions invite dialogue. Questions allow for the voice of the wounded to be heard, and for the supplicant to speak in their own way. The writer of James is inviting dialogue here among the faithful. This is not just as a rhetorical device, but an empathic one. He asks not because he has to, but because he's genuinely interested. It's like he believes them and wants to know each of them in a deep down way. He believes her story in all of its complexity. He discerns the truth behind what he isn't saying. And, he writes to them, to all of them, with love.

The letter writer James writes a letter to twelve tribes, which is to say a whole lot of people, and in it he takes the time to ask how they're doing. And then, like a good advice columnist like Dear Abby or the Ethicist or Dan Savage, he replies with a bit of cordial instruction. Are any of you suffering? You should pray. Cheerful? Sing! Sick? Pray and be anointed. These are good hints; Heloise would approve. There's one bit of instruction here that comes much more pointedly than a question, though. In the vulnerability and intimacy of the dialogue James invites, baked right into the text, there's a call to confession and honesty that feels as vital today as it must have when James was writing nearly 2,000 years ago. The very fiber of this text is a moral code for how communities hold themselves accountable. In the listening to the testimony of his people who been hurt, to the complaints and woes they bring, he reminds them of the importance of confession as an act of healing. "Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another," James writes, "so that you may be healed." In owning the sins and grievances of our youth, we invite healing for ourselves, and for the whole of the community. When we don't, we cause even more damage, discord that James wants to avoid. The healing here is an act of integrity, of doing the right thing even when no one else is looking. This is good advice that helps close out James' letter; it's the careful discharge of wisdom and instruction that comes when we say so long or come to the end of a time together.

For us, though, our time is just beginning. What questions shall we ask of one another? You are a church far older than I, a community of faith that has been singing songs of praise, praying for those who suffer and anointing the sick for over 125 years. Your communal history is rich and deep, and it is an honor to join with you today as we begin writing our next chapter. Each of you also have your own stories to tell: stories I want to know, stories that may be as diverse as God's imagination. Stories that we should lift up and celebrate in our difference as each of us is a unique creation created in the image of God. Over a period of three and a half months this past spring, a team of your—our—elders, deacons, and members began asking me what kind of person I am. I too was asking questions and discerning the nature of ministry needed and whether or not I was called to serve you.

In final tally, your search committee and I went through seven rounds of interviews where in total I met with 32 different individuals who all helped and guided this discernment. From each of these 32 I began hearing your individual stories, stories that frankly I came to love, people I came to love. As the Spirit was willing and as we listened, I stand here today ready to take on your mantle of Senior Minister worn by only five predecessors here at West End. I come to you with strong shoulders knowing full well the weight and the work of what has been, what is, and what may be. Now that the search committee has invited and the corporate business has been conducted, this call—that is to all of us—now becomes something much more personal.

The question now becomes one for each of us, it's a question that like the ones James poses, requires searching and honesty. Will you let me pastor among you in Christ's name? Will you trust me to bear your burdens and to celebrate your joys with you? Will this be a place where all are welcome just as they are without pretense or façade? Are we ready to be the church that is reformed and always reforming and to live as a resurrection people always waking to the glory of a new day?

These are questions that, again, are not just mine, but are the very history of the church through all time. As Jesus's notoriety was spreading throughout the ancient near East, as his deeds of power and works of mercy were told and retold among the people, the original disciples had these same questions in mind. Out doing their ministerial work one day, they came upon a man that they did not recognize and did not know. He may not have looked like any of the twelve, and truthfully they may not have liked him, or where he came from. But get this—the stranger, the one that they didn't know, he was ministering in Jesus's name, which is to say that the gospel even in these early days when Jesus was still alive had begun to spread. The church, even in the first generation, had begun to change. And in the disciples' reaction you can hear the resistance to change all of us know. So strong is our resistance to change that the disciple John tells Jesus they tried to stop the man and I wonder what exactly they might have said to this stranger minister. “What are you doing? That's not how we do it here. Stop that, we're not *that* kind of church.” These are understandable emotions; they're very human, just like us. The disciples knew and loved Jesus, they were following him and they knew how they liked to do things, how things were always done. They thought they were special—and they are—because they and they alone were ministering with him. The rub, however, comes when what we think makes us special risks making us exclusive.

Jesus responds to the concerns of the twelve saying let the new, as yet unknown friend minister and he invites the disciples to consider a church that is still becoming itself. Church here is a verb. Church is praying and singing. Church is honoring what has been and also changing into what we will be. Church lives holding a tension, a balance, a fulcrum in between heaven and earth. In order to be living, church must be growing, and growing is sometimes uncomfortable. We like who we are. We've worked hard to get where we are. Aren't we good just as we are? Yes, and. The good news is that Christ who has promised life and life abundantly offers us nothing to lose and everything to gain. Neither Jesus nor anyone here is going to take anything away. And yet, we are a resurrection people. We know that somethings will indeed fade away in order that new growth may come again in the spring. Jesus' words to those original disciples that still speak to us today is that the church will always, always be doing a new thing. Why? The answer's simple and it may surprise you. It's right there in the gospel. It's for these little ones and for the ones who live on the margins, who don't look like us or don't minister like we're used to, and for the sake of a generation still to come. Let none of us put a stumbling block in front of one of these little ones lest we follow the wrong god home and miss our star.