

## The Letter of James 3: THE CHURCH

James 5:13-20 [MW19-09]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 03 March 2019

When I say the word “church” what immediately comes to mind for you?

- what image, what feeling, what picture, words, memory?
- take a moment to think and then you might like to talk with those around you

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Anything anyone would like to share about “church”

During Vacation Bible School a teacher had an experience with her primary class that she says she will never forget. Her class was interrupted on Wednesday about an hour before dismissal when a new student was brought in. The little boy had one arm missing, and since the class was almost over, she had no opportunity to learn any of the details about the cause or his state of adjustment. She was very nervous and afraid that one of the other children would comment on his handicap and embarrass him. There was no opportunity to caution them, so she proceeded as carefully as possible. As the class time came to a close, she began to relax. She asked the class to join her in their usual closing ceremony. "Let's make our churches," she said. "Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and there's..." The awful truth of her own actions struck her. The very thing she had feared that the children would do, she had done. As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, “Davey, let's make the church together.”

I was talking to someone last week who in the course of our conversation

- felt it was important to point out that the church is not a building  
the church is people
- which is a good point  
it's something we used to remind each other of at theological college
- James reminds us that it's even more than that  
James tells us church is not just people  
it is relationships, how people react to each other
- how they care for each other  
how they relate to the wider community and the world  
what they do, how they speak ...

James in his whole letter is giving down to earth practical advice on

- how to *be* the body of Christ, the church  
the church not as a building, not as an organisation
- not even as a magnificent idea whose time has come

For James the crux is two things: faith and works

- faith, and how it shows  
how it works in people's lives
- in people's individual lives  
and together, in their corporate community life
- that for James is “church”

James gives a concrete and clear picture of what this “church” is like

- of how to be the ‘body of Christ’  
how to be this group in which faith is brought to life
- and we heard it in our second Bible reading this morning

Very practical

- very simple  
though not necessarily very easy ...

If you are in trouble, pray

- are you hurting, are things going wrong, are you confused, upset, out of sorts ...  
PRAY

That's the first thing to note about this group called "church": they pray

- they pray  
no fancy words or formulas, they just pray
- and they pray expecting things to happen!  
prayer puts them in touch with the power of God  
enables the strength and the grace of God  
to work on the troubles and problems of life

The second thing to note is they praise

- if you are feeling good you should sing praises  
do you feel great, are things going well, are you enjoying life: SING
- the early Christians were recognised for always being joyful  
often when it seemed they had little to be joyful about
- they seemed to continually have on their lips songs of praise  
for the mercy and the grace of God
- this group, whatever the situation  
seemed to be able to remember an infinite love and enjoy a present glory

Another distinctive characteristic is that of "healing"

- James instructed:  
if you are sick, call the church leaders to pray for you and anoint you  
believing prayer will heal you and Jesus will put you on your feet
- just like that!

This group was devotedly attentive to the sick

- and people were healed of all sorts of illnesses  
alongside this was the care for those weaker or overlooked  
widows, orphans, strangers
- a reminder that the 'social gospel' is not an add-on or optional extra  
it is the very essence of the Christian life

This group prayed, sang and worked together

- and there was something else too  
something else that showed in their life and what they were able to do  
something about relationships and miracles
- if you have sinned, you should tell each other what you have done  
then you can pray for one another and be healed

When people were right with each other and right with God

- the mercy and might of God was able to flow powerfully  
through the whole community

James' instruction was certainly practical

- but it was not logical  
in fact it was contrary to the wisdom of his day  
and is even more contrary to the wisdom of our day

The logic of the world says that someone who is sick or weak or less able

- should be left behind  
that way more resources are left for those who are doing well
- sharing with those who are weak is a distraction and can weaken the healthy  
as a healthy organism recoils from what is sick to protect itself  
so too a healthy organisation excludes the sick and weak

In a remarkable reversal of logic James instructs that

- the poor, the weak, the sick are to be honoured  
the sick are told in no uncertain terms  
that they are to summon the leaders to pray for them
- the weak, those who are perhaps least able and least contributing  
have first call on the leaders
- when you look at how our society tends to operate  
it sure makes you think ...

And just like those annoying infomercials ...but wait, there's more

- the benefit to the whole group is that not only those who are ill are helped  
in fact the whole group is 'healed' or 'saved'  
by the confession of sins and the prayer of faith
- for James "church" is that group, that community, which seeks friendship with God  
through its prayer and praise  
and its care of the poor, the weak, the ill, the forgotten

As Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

From its opening words to its last, James witnesses to a way of life that is truly radical in its implications. It ... challenges Christians to an integrity in thought speech and action ... sketching a vision of [a] world ... based [on] solidarity and peace rather than competition and violence.

It's actually not that difficult to bring this world into being

- and it makes a huge difference  
as this autobiographical story by writer James L. Henderschedt shows  
(from *The Light in the Lantern*, p.68)

## The Picnic

Jim's childhood is a painful memory. He was different from the other kids in school and in the neighborhood. Oh, just to look at him you would not see the difference. On the surface he was like any other boy. No, it wasn't until Jim would try to run or climb stairs that the difference would be seen. He could not do either very well.

His parents had Jim to the doctor a number of times, trying to find out why it was that their child could not run. Like other children, why climbing stairs was so laborious for him. But, the doctor was stumped too. Once he prescribed tartar and sulfur as a tonic. "That ought to straighten him out," the doctor observed. It didn't. Another time the doctor told Jim's parents that the boy was 'muscle-bound' and he would grow out of it.

Well, Jim didn't grow out of it. He remained different. He couldn't run, and climbing stairs was a chore. Now, to most people this is no big deal. "So what if he can't run or climb stairs? There are other things in life than running and climbing stairs"

Not to a young boy whose friends are playing baseball, and basketball, and football. All these sports make running necessary. And not to a young boy who had to attend physical education classes in school where they played baseball, and basketball, and football. The worst part always was when they picked teams. Jim was never the captain of the team, so he never had the opportunity to pick. He was always in the group of boys who stood to the side waiting to be pointed at and then walk to the team that was being assembled. Jim could always predict what was going to happen. He would be the last one picked. And he knew his team would say, "Aw, do we have to have him on our team again?" Physical Education class was pure torture for Jim. So, to survive the humiliation, he became skilled at faking illness and being excused from class. This was not only good for Jim; it was also a relief for the teachers and the rest of the class. That way they did not have to contend with the dilemma of a perfectly healthy boy who could not run or climb stairs.

So, Jim spent his childhood sitting on his front porch, reading books, skipping physical education class, and trying not to be hurt. The time came, however, when Jim became an adolescent and sought out those mends who would accept him as he was. It was no easy chore, for different people are not always welcomed in 'normal' circles. He did find acceptance, though, in his church's youth group. They did things that Jim could do, and when he couldn't, there was always someone who saw that he was not off by himself. For the first time in his life, Jim didn't feel like a wall-flower.

Then, there came that fateful day when the youth went on a picnic. It was a glorious day. Hot dogs were roasted over an open fire. They drank birch beer on tap. The kids played, and joked, and sang songs. Then someone said, "Let's play tag!"

Jim's heart sank. "Oh God, not here too."

The group ran off down the lane to the open field where the game was to be held, leaving Jim by the side of the road where he watched with tears in his eyes. Once again his difference became a barrier. But, just as Jim was turning to go back into the grove to sit at the picnic table, his friend Melvin and a handful of others stopped and turned.

"Hey, Jim," Melvin called out. "Come on with us. You can play too. We'll wait for you."

That was the day that Jim learned that the church, the body of Christ, is that group that is willing to include everyone, even and especially those that are different; that group that is willing to wait for those who have difficulty keeping up; that group that will even adapt the game so that others can play when playing can be next to impossible.

We are the church, the body of Christ

- we are to read the Letter of James for a check up, a tune up, a W.O.F. and then continue with our mission of making the church, together