Sunday, September 23, 2012

James 3 (a continuation)

We've been reading through the book of James for the last 4 Sundays....
A book in the Wisdom tradition, and the key question in the book is the relationship between faith and works.
IF, as I say every week "God loves you very much and no matter what...."
then, some might say, it doesn't matter what we do, so let's do what we want. God will always forgive us so...
So does what we do matter, or not?
Luther called it "a book of straw" The basis of his understanding of the Gospel is that we are justified by faith and not by works.
James is a book that stresses just the opposite.....James says it matters very much what we do, in fact, without works, James says, faith is dead.

Chapter 2 focuses on how we sometimes treat the rich and the poor differently and what a shameful thing that is.

Chapter 3 talks about how we speak. How we can use our words to hurt or to heal.

This week I want to continue that discussion in a specific way – and it has to do with the power of words.

Not long ago, I was with a group of colleagues, sitting around a table....and it turned out that one of the guys at the table hadn't received a message that had been sent around....it turns out that his wife had taken the message and forgotten to pass it along to him. He said: "I guess I'll have to go home and beat her."

The room went silent.
What do you say?
If you were there, would you have said anything?
And if so, what?

My question this morning is about that. The power of words and the power of silence to build or to break down. To further the realm of God or to hinder it, with words. His. Mine.

What do you do in that kind of situation? For me, it always depends.....take that example with my colleague. To speak up at that moment as a woman, would be heard very differently than if a man had spoken.
For me, to have said "that's not funny" I'd risk being seen as ....one of those woman with no sense of humour – one of those feminists.
For one of my male colleagues to have said "that's not funny" he'd risk having his status lowered – that used to happen to my husband all the time. He'd speak up on a "woman's issue" and people would grin and say "she's trained you well" - still, though, his voice was taken more seriously than mine and that's something to realize....the first principle I want to hold up this morning: if you are not part of the group that's being hurt by the comment, your words have more power.

I'm just saying, there's a cost in speaking out.

Or...what if it were a racial slur? Someone tells a racist joke, or slams some group of people.... You're with friends. What do you do? Ruin a social occasion?
No. It's the other person who has ruined it already. That's the second principle: by speaking up, I'm not the one ruining a moment, it's already been done by a thoughtless comment.

I guess I'm trying to push this James theme about how important what we say really is.

It's one thing to say "don't gossip"
but how do we use our words to build up God's world and not tear it down in situations like that? They happen all the time.

IF we believe that the love of God is for everyone without exception, that everyone is equal in God's sight, and that to follow Jesus is to follow him in ways that make this world conform more closely to the dream of God;
IF we believe that, then that has to show itself in how we live and what we do and what we say.
How do you use your words to build God's realm in that situation when saying nothing is a sin?

That's principle #3: Not speaking up can be as bad as having said the thing myself.

It's not like....say...gossip – when the obvious is "if you can't say anything nice don't say anything at all" as my Grandmother used to say. In this case, to say nothing is to participate in the harm that's been done.

I would be very interested in a discussion about this. How do YOU handle that?

One of the factors for me is – how do you do it in a way that doesn't immediately put someone on the defensive, so that they can't hear what you're saying? How to say "I find that offensive" in a way that invites openness and discussion, and doesn't set up an "us and them" kind of situation?

I had a discussion with some folks this week about this. One suggestion was this: when someone says something offensive, what about asking where they first learned that attitude – try to find out where it's coming from, how they came to believe that – that all people with blue eyes are lazy, or whatever the attitude is.
Another track, or course, is to always speak for yourself: not "YOU'RE wrong" but "I felt hurt when you said that"
and the truth is, that maybe that person will never see what's wrong with what they said, and I guess that's a chance you take, but others who hear you speak up will be empowered. Many were probably feeling uncomfortable as well, or maybe learned from what you said
and the person who made the original comment? Well, maybe they roll their eyes, tell you have no sense of humour...but maybe they think twice before they say something like that again.
And maybe when the time is right, your voice will be a small part of what leads them to a change of attitude.

I think of it this way:
If it were me – If I said something offensive to someone, how would I want to be treated? If I offended you,
first I would want you to respect me enough to speak up. To say nothing would be to say that I'm not even worth it. You know?
So for you to speak, even to tell me that I've hurt you, is to respect me.

Then, I'd want you to explain why, and trust me to be able to understand that.
And if I can't understand right away, don't give up on me. I didn't always think the way I do now.
Learning is a process, and I still have lots to learn and we help each other by our honesty.

The larger question is: What is the wisdom here? The wise thing to do?
How do we change attitudes? How do we offer people a different set of lenses or a different way to thinking?
There is so much prejudice....against people because of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, so much. You'd think we'd have learned but ....apparently not.
How do we challenge those things when they show up in conversations when we're least expecting them?
A perfectly normal conversation is happening and all of a sudden someone says something very hurtful
–   this is an opportunity to speak the Gospel
–   to change an attitude
–   and so to change the world. Really change the world.
The HOW is still something I struggle with.
HOW do people who work for the truth
HOW to speak so that others can hear and have the opportunity to be transformed by the power of the Gospel?
I've been building myself a list of principles in this and so far
they are:

1)   not to say anything is to participate in the attitude being expressed. It's as bad as saying it myself.
2)   My words have power especially if I'm not part of the group being slurred
3)   if I'm feeling guilty because speaking out is going to ruin the occasion, I need to remember that I did not ruin it – the occasion has already been ruined by the person who did the speaking in the first place.
4)   I need to always speak for myself, and I need to remember that speaking up influences not only the person to whom I'm speaking but also those who are listening
5)   to challenge someone on something they said is really a gift of taking them seriously.
6)   People can learn and they can change
7)   the Gospel is proclaimed in just this way.

From a pulpit, yes\but more often and more powerfully in these ways. You, speaking the truth when it costs you to do so.
YOU, embodying the truth and enfleshing the Good News of God's love for everyone.