

“Willing to Yield”
September 19, 2021
Scripture: James 3:13—4:3, 7, 8a; Mark 9:30-37

I don’t know about you, but I probably scroll through social media like Facebook and Twitter a lot more than I should. Sometimes I don’t even bother to read a lot of it; it’s just something to do when I’m bored or feeling a little overwhelmed. I can’t help but wonder, though, how these platforms have shaped the ways we communicate with one another. There’s a lot of political content on them and a lot of social commentary, often both in the same posting, but there’s not much, or often any, conversation. It seems like it’s designed to encourage folks to take a stance and then defend it no matter what argument or evidence is presented to the contrary.

There’s a quote, from either Oscar Wilde or George Bernard Shaw, I’m not sure which: “you can’t reason someone out of a belief they didn’t reason themselves into.” When our views are formed by emotional reaction, engaging the back, deeper part of our brains, it’s hard for us to use the front part, the cognitive/rational part, and consider other views. Social media posts are often more emotional than rational, so meaningful dialogue is hard. I suppose every generation thinks it’s the first to experience this sort of thing, but this letter of James tells me we’ve been this way for a long time.

James is more interested in sharing wisdom than doctrine. The writer sees behaviors in the churches that are troubling because they lack humility. People seem to be taking intractable stances and refusing to hear the people around them. He says they are motivated by “envy and selfish ambition.” He calls their behavior unspiritual and devilish. Pretty strong words. We don’t know what’s happening in these churches, really, but we can imagine they’re full of human beings with human egos, just like ours. There are some things about us that never seem to change. James would feel right at home on Facebook or Twitter...and maybe a little saddened.

Sad because we don’t seem to be making much progress from the days he was writing. We still put more confidence in our gut reaction to the world than in “wisdom from above,” as he calls it. Of all the qualities of that wisdom he lists, I think the hardest to cultivate is being willing to yield. What does that mean and how do we do it?

I think a willingness to yield is not so much about giving up as it is about letting go. It isn’t done out of despair or grudgingly. We yield as a way of protecting our spirits, not allowing them to be dragged down into the selfish ambition or envy James warns us against. Yielding is about relinquishing our egos and allowing ourselves to be shaped by a deeper influence. In the gospel story Jesus is trying to share with his disciples what yielding looks like. He tells them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” This is the second time Jesus describes what waits for him in Jerusalem and his disciples remain oblivious. They don’t have the capacity really to hear what he’s telling them about himself and about what being his followers means.

The subject of their argument is revealing. Right after Jesus describes a complete release of ego, all they can do is focus on theirs, arguing over who’s the greatest among them. To

counter that Jesus first tells them that being greatest means being last of all and servant of all, then he shows them what that looks like. He takes a child in his arms and tells them to welcome such a one in his name.

Why a child? In the first century children, while they were certainly loved and cherished, weren't given the same consideration as full persons the way they are today. A child's identity was dependent on their father, mostly, and children without fathers would have been considered orphans, even if their mothers were around. That's partly why we can find a special regard for widows and orphans in Hebrew scripture and in the New Testament. Welcoming a child in the way Jesus describes was unthinkable; it meant becoming a servant to a child. That's how completely he tells them to let go of their egos.

I think of all the qualities James lists, yielding is the fulcrum everything hinges on. And it's something we must learn to do for ourselves. We must be *willing* to yield. There's an intentionality to this we need to respect. Yielding doesn't just happen. So, if we're waiting for some kind of sign from God or some sort of experience to bring us around, we'll never get there. We have to set out intentionally to yield our hearts and spirits, to let go of our egos, if we want to live as Jesus' disciples. It's hard to do. And if this letter and other letters in the New Testament are any indication, after two thousand years we're not likely to mature our way there naturally. We won't just grow into it. If anything we're becoming more entrenched in our ego-drivenness, more committed to elevating ourselves at the expense of others.

The way we tear ourselves from our egomania is deliberately to put ourselves in positions of service. We must become servants in the world. We have to put ourselves in places where we're uncomfortable, maybe even unwelcome, and allow ourselves to be educated. We need to become children in the world, to see with fresh eyes how others live so we can identify with their needs and walk alongside them. We don't have to rescue anyone; that's not our job. Our job is to help shoulder the world's burdens and make the world's pain our own.

Opportunities to do that are everywhere. We can go ten miles in any direction from this place and find people living in terrible poverty. They're in our neighborhoods and rural areas and in urban centers like in Buffalo. Over the next several weeks we'll be receiving into our community a population of folks from Afghanistan who are coming with literally nothing but the clothes they're wearing. We're called to become their servants. We're called to make room for them in our community, to provide them with the essentials they'll need to set up homes and lay roots here. What kind of servants will we be?

Will we be able to lay aside our egos and let them in? We must be willing to yield our status, our privilege; willing to give some of what we own to provide them what they'll need. Becoming willing to yield, happily letting go of power and control, is at the heart of life in community. It's a daily practice we're called to in every facet of our lives. When James says, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom," he's inviting us to examine our priorities and behaviors, to look critically at our lives and make changes that will lead to deeper relationships and more faithful living.

And it all begins with letting go, willingly, lovingly, yielding to the movement of God's Spirit who draws us nearer to God, even as God comes near to us.

Amen