

"Having the Right Friends"
James 4:1-10

September 23, 2018

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Friends – we all value them. Friends are the people with whom we spend the most time and who give us the most happiness. Friends are the people whose advice we will pay attention to and often take because they are the people in whom we place the most trust. Having friends may cost us friendships with other people, but we don't care. These are our people and we will do most anything for them.

Remember how much your parents wanted to know the identity of your friends in high school? We may have thought they were just being nosy, but parents had a concern which had some validity to it. They knew that the wrong kind of friends could influence us in a negative way and cause trouble for us. Parents knew what we often ignored or didn't believe: having friends is important, but having the right friends is even more important. In our epistle reading for today, James makes essentially the same point about our life with God.

James warns us about being friends with "the world." Now what is that? Originally, God created the world to be good so, in the time of Adam and Eve, loving the world was a good thing. However, now, since sin has corrupted and ruined, not only us, but the world itself, the word "world" now refers to all that is in opposition to God or can be used in opposition to God.

The world can refer to wealth, technology, possessions, sex, sports, our education in school, our profession in the community, and so on. In and of themselves, these things are not sinful or in opposition to God. In fact, all of these things seem to be good, enjoyable, and often necessary. They are the things which we most desire; the things we spend the most time in acquiring and using; the things we covet and desire; the things which most influence our lives and our actions. In short, the world becomes our friend.

We may think it's all pretty harmless. After all, we are just going along with the crowd. However, when you mix these good gifts in with choices which are made and priorities which are established in the acquisition and use of them, then you start to have a problem. Add to the mix emotions that fight for these things, lust after these things, greedily collect these things, and strongly covet those things, and you have a real problem. Our friend, the world, becomes our best friend in terms of our desires, priorities, and uses of the things in this world. It becomes our ally in terms of how we feel and how we react to things in the world. The world influences us in a bad way and can cause great problems for us, perhaps without us even knowing it.

James has some very harsh and blunt words for Christians in the first century and for us today. If you and I choose to make the world our friend in terms of going along with the world's way of evaluating things, prioritizing things, and feeling about things, then, James says, you and I are making ourselves enemies of God and placing ourselves in opposition to Him. He calls us "adulterous people" for having cheated on Him with the world.

That may seem a bit harsh, doesn't it? I can hear the eyes of some people rolling at that statement. Don't we often condemn the world for its worldliness in deserting God and ignoring His Commandments? The truth of the matter is the world is worldly because it's the world. It is already living in opposition to God and as enemies of His will. We should expect such things from the world, that is, nonbelievers.

But us? Yes, us! Christians today are fighting hard to become friends of the world. We want the world to like us. We want to have all the same stuff that the world has. We want to choose the same methodology to obtain this stuff. We want to operate according to the same priorities in our use of this stuff. We want to live the same life as those in the world do and hope that nobody notices we are Christians.

However, we aren't fooling anybody as we live our lives as friends of the world while putting a thin veneer of Christianity over it. In fact, James blasts the church of his day for how their desire to be a friend of the world worked out for them. Our epistle today is quite blunt and to the point as he talks about quarrels and fights in the congregations instigated by their lusts and desires. These desires cause them to fight and quarrel. They coveted what they could not have and did not possess it because they did not ask the Lord for it. They prayed wrongly for what they wanted, only to spend it on their passions.

Does any of this sound familiar today and our congregation? Don't we see ourselves trying hard to be like the world and friends with it? We adopt their agenda. We make their priorities our priorities. We have quarrels and fights among members which cause uneasy feelings and people to leave. We all want what we want and jealously quarrel over what we don't have. (Just listen to a discussion of the use of Thrivent Money.) We do not have many things, perhaps, because we never actually asked the Lord for them. Or we ask for things wrongly to use them and wrong ways.

The results of trying to be a friend with the world at the same time attempting to be a Christian are not good. James says that we are "adulterous people" for having cheated on God with the world. We are at enmity with God. That means we are in opposition to Him and His commandments. The fault for this is not God's. He is not some petty little deity who requires allegiance from us who will go off in a snit if we don't do it. He desires, more than anything in the world, to have us as friends. We are the ones who demand what we want and run off from God when we don't get it.

Make no mistake about it. This is a serious thing. Twice James refers to us as being enemies of God and in opposition to Him. This will result in destroying our lives here on earth and threatening our eternal lives in heaven. Ignoring it by running away, blaming others for it, or being blissfully ignorant of it is part of the problem, not the solution. Continuing as friends of the world means opposition to God, being enemies of God, and being eternally separated from God.

Wouldn't it be much better to be friends with God? The problem is that, coming into this world sinful in nature and living in this world sinful in deed, we are unable to make friends with a holy and righteous God. In fact, we don't want to make friends with God since, as a result of our sin, we are blind to His Word, in opposition to His will, and dead in our sin. It all sounds a bit hopeless.

However, God, in His overwhelming grace and unbelievable love does what we could not do and did not want to do. He changes us into His friends. Being a friend of God is not deserved as a right like being born into a country gives you the right of citizenship. Being a friend of God is not earned as a reward like filling out citizenship papers to become a citizen. God did not make us His friends because we are friendly people with whom He had developed an affinity. God did not respond to our friend request on Facebook when we sought His friendship.

There was nothing friend-like in us at all which would make God desire to be friends with us. In fact, as the text says, we did everything against being friends with God. Nevertheless, His love prevailed. The Bible puts it this way, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”(Romans 5:6-9)

Jesus came to die for us while we were weak and His enemies, not obedient slaves or potential friends. By the forgiveness of sins earned there on the cross, we are no longer enemies. We are not even slaves any longer. We are friends. Jesus said, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends.” (John 15:12) By Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, we have a new life through our baptism. We have a new relationship with God as friends, even children, because of that baptism. We are his friends now and we look forward to an eternal new life in heaven where we shall enjoy an eternal friendship that never ends.

There is one drawback to this wonderful plan. In making ourselves friends of the world, that caused us to be the enemy of God and in opposition to His will. This earned us eternal wrath and punishment. However, in God making us to be friends with Himself, this puts us in opposition to the world and makes its ruler, Satan, our enemy. And Satan doesn’t like this one little bit. He will fight to regain your friendship by enticing you with the things of this world. Be very careful. Since you are now friends of God by His undeserved love for you, live as friends of God.

James shows us how to do this in the remaining verses of this lesson. Instead of trying to be friends of this world or attempting to balance friendship with God with friendship for the world, repent. This does not mean giving up the things of this world or living as a hermit in the desert. Use the many blessings God has for us in this world and enjoy them. But turn away from the sin of being friends with this world and loving the things of the world to the exclusion of God.

Seek the forgiveness which Jesus has won for you on the cross and which He distributes to you in the Word of God through its various forms: Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, says James and purify your hearts, you double minded. Guaranteed by Jesus’ resurrection of the dead,

you will receive that forgiveness, that cleansing of your actions, and the purification of your mind and motives.

Do not allow Satan to dictate the terms of your life regarding the things of this world. He will attempt to lure you into doing things that are evil and using the good things of this life for wrong purposes. Resist the devil, James says, and he will flee from you. Adapt the theme of our Hymn of the Day in which we acknowledge the goodness and value of the things of this world, but, at the same time, acknowledging the lack of importance of these things in the long run, as we ask “What is the world to me?”

Live God’s way, not the world’s way. Draw near to God, James says and he will draw near to you.” As God draws near to us, we draw near to one another in support and encouragement for one another as a congregation together for worship, fellowship, and much more. Be in the Word of God to know His will and the desire of your Friend. Be in the word to receive His strength and his encouragement. Be in the word to receive His forgiveness and blessing from one friend to another.

Friends – we do value them. But value the right friends for the right reason. If the world is our friend, it is only a temporary friendship and makes us enemies of God at the same time. However, with God as our friend, it is an eternal friendship which gives us all that we need now and more than we can even imagine in the life to come. That’s not only having friends, but that’s having the right friend. Amen