

Keys on Community Building from the Book of James

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As this is part of a series, let's do a wee refresher on some of the things we talked about last week. We noted how extraordinary it was to have a document in our possession written by one of Jesus' flesh & blood siblings, & we noted how James had his own conversion experience after initially not being a follower of Jesus, & that possibly as a part of the conversion experience, James had had his own post-resurrection encounter with the risen Christ (as discussed in 1 Corinthians 15:7). We learned too, that James's letter is full of practical advice on how we can live well in community with one another in the here & now. It's a really, really practical wee book.

Last week when we were working thru James Chapter two, we focused on three main things: that faith without works is dead, and that in the Kingdom of God there should be an essential egalitarianism or equality between all people, and the need of the rich to share with the poor. By the way how did people get on with the homework we set last week - did many people look at the website www.globalrichlist.com ? And how was that - any surprises?

We'll you might also remember that last week I said that this week we'd focus in on one of the other important themes in the book of James, and that is the theme of **how we as a community of believers can live in genuine peace and genuine unity with one another**, rather than **in conflict or in superficiality**, and it is these two themes (of good communication & of genuine peace making) I want to pick up on & talk more about today.

We sophisticated people living in the 21st Century need to remind ourselves that the book of James, like all the book of the New Testament - with the possible exception of the book of Philemon - was written to a *community* of believers. And within each of those communities, it would have been only a minority who were literate, so it would have required someone with that ability to stand up & read the letter out to the others, and then they would have discussed it together. And in their discussions they wouldn't be analysing the Greek meaning of the words, or anything like that, they'd have simply been discussing "how can we as a community take this advice, this teaching, & put it into practice".

This material here in James, & indeed through the whole of Scripture, on how to get on with one another, is something that we here at Leith want to be really getting our teeth into. After all, our banner statement as a church is

'Growing great community'

which I think is a wonderful mission statement, because we as human beings are all born with a hunger & desire to be a part of a genuine, loving community. And in terms of outreach it's fantastic too; a number of times I've heard Richard say from up here, that if only we could learn the secret of truly loving one another, this place would be bursting at the seams - & it would. Because people are thirsting for genuine community, for real relationships and for genuine love

As most of you know, for about 17 years Susan & I were based in Cambodia, serving with a Christian mission called Servants. For the latter part of that time I also had pastoral responsibility for our other teams in Asia, & I would visit them to check with them how everything was going. One of the distinctives of Servants is that we work together in close knit teams. These are teams of people living & working in urban slums, seeking to proclaim and be the good news among the poor, and so as you can imagine, living in places like that meant dealing with a lot of stressful & distressing situations, & often under a lot of pressure. And what we learnt from that is that time is that working in teams & living in community is not easy, most of us Westerners have been raised to be very individualistic & so community is often difficult for us to do well, & we have to really work at it in order to make it happen; & we learnt that when it works well, when you are part of team where people respect and value & support one another, it's magnificent, and together you can achieve things that are far greater than the sum of your individual parts or individual efforts. But, we also learned, that if it goes wrong, it can be just exhausting.

Has anyone else had this same kind of experience with community & with teams, & even with churches - when it's great, it's absolutely great, & when it's not going well, it's exhausting?

Fortunately, here in James' letter there's some really practical advice on how we can achieve this - that is, how we can move towards being a community of people who love and support one another, rather than being a group of people who are torn apart by, or exhausted by conflict; or, as a third possibility, which is probably where most churches are at - just puddle around in the shallows of being nice & polite to one another, but never doing the hard work of pushing through to form a genuine community with an inspiring sense of purpose & having an impact on the world around us.

Either we:

>Avoid conflict

>Get stuck in conflict

Or we

>Process conflict

What I've done as I've prepared today's message is that I have gone through James' letter, & focused in on five really important tools, or keys, that James gives us, that will enable us to live well and relate well. With one another *in* community and *as* a community.

In other words to **grow great community**.

So here are those five tools

1. Learn to listen well (1:10)
 2. Let mercy triumph over judgment (2:12-13, 4:12)
 3. Use your tongue to bless (build up), not curse (tear down) (3:3-12)
 4. Treat all others as those made in the image of God (3:9)
 5. Commit yourself to becoming a peacemaker - not a peace keeper (3:17-18)
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Let's look at the **FIRST ONE** - learn to listen. Back in chapter 1, v 10 gives us this brilliant piece of advice that we are to be *quick to listen, slow to speak, & slow to become angry*.

I have a friend called Mark, who has lead teams working in slums in two different cities in India for about 18 years now. Mark originally trained as a lawyer in Australia, but since living in India has become, I would say, quite brilliant at facilitating grass roots community development & community empowerment among the poor there. But interestingly, among all the many skills Mark has, once when I asked him what the most valuable skill was that he'd ever learnt, he said 'Active listening'. By *active listening*, he meant that skill of giving another person your full attention when they are speaking, of fully focusing on their words without falling into the trap of rehearsing in your head what you are going to say back them; Active listening or reflective listening also means ensuring you have truly understood the other person by reflecting back what you think you are hearing, & ensuring with them that you have heard what they really do mean. More than

anything else Mark would say that that is the skill that has helped him to become a good leader, a good community development worker, and a good proclaimer of the Gospel. Now if you are not 100% sure of what we mean by 'active listening' - don't despair, as there's an opportunity to come to a workshop on this in 4 weeks' time!

And the magic of this skill is, that **all of us** want to be deeply listened to, because it helps us to feel valued, it helps us to feel understood, and it helps us to feel significant. But it's also one of those paradoxical gifts, like say respect, that the more you give it away, the more you get it back. The more respect you give another person, the more likely you are to gain respect back from them; & likewise, the more we listen to another person - actively, empathetically, deeply - the more likely that person is to listen to us.

And you know what, in our church we are really blessed to have a resource person here like Lynne Baab who has written & taught a lot about the skill of deep listening. In fact just last year Lynne published a book called 'The Power of Listening', which is a really good & helpful book. And Lynne & I have been talking, & we'd like to run a half-day workshop in 4 weeks-time doing some deeper training on the power of good listening, and on some of the other skills I'm going to mention this morning. So there will be a purple clip board circulating this morning that you can sign up on if you are interested in coming to this workshop on the morning of the 20th of June - in 4 weeks-time.

Now also in this same verse, 1:10, James has told us to be slow to speak & slow to become angry. This is good advice isn't, especially when someone says something we disagree with, or that pushes our buttons, or worse still - actually criticises us. And it's not that we should never answer them back, but that we want our answer to be not just a knee jerk reaction because we feel threatened or defensive, but one that is calm & one that has fully heard & considered what the other person has said, and doesn't just react, lashing back. **We want to become a people who respond rather than react.** And of course, when people disagree or criticise us, there's nearly always at least some truth in what they say, & if we are wise we can learn & we can grow through that criticism.

Notice too, that James says we should be slow to become angry. But he doesn't say we should never become angry. And that's because **godly anger** - as opposed to our own anger that comes out of us simply not getting our own way - is a **God given emotion, given to warn us when abuse or injustice is occurring, either to others or to ourselves, and godly anger is given to stir us to action, & to being courageous.** But to get to that place, anger is an energy that needs to be controlled and channeled into a constructive response, rather than a destructive one; and it it's a force which needs to be used for the good of the whole community, rather than for

any self-serving purpose. All of which is why self-control is mentioned so often as one of the fruit of the Spirit. And certainly when we look at the life of Jesus, we see many instances where he becomes angry over injustices & abuses that were being inflicted by the strong over the weak in his society.

In yesterday's paper, I was reading again about the horrible abuses of children that took place in the 60's & 70's in Catholic orphanages in Australia - & not just Catholic, but many protestant run orphanages as well. The main point the article was making was that there were clergy who knew or at least should have known that abuse was taking place, but didn't do enough to stop it. Well one thing we know for sure is that if the Jesus of the gospels had been physically there, he would have stopped it. He would have braided a whip of cords and kicked over some tables until it stopped, because opposing abuse and injustice is one of the functions of godly anger given by the Spirit of God.

But you can see from this that it becomes crucial that we learn to differentiate between anger given to us by God to protect either others or ourselves against a real injustice, versus our own human anger that flares up perhaps because we are too thin skinned or perhaps because we are unable to hear a harsh reality coming at us from outside. I have a bit of a tendency to collect sayings, and one of my absolute favourites is from Mother Teresa (and she said a lot of wise things), but my favourite is this one:

If you know who you are, neither praise nor criticism will touch you

In other words, if we really know who we are, & are really in touch with reality, we won't easily be puffed up by praise; and neither will be easily wounded by other people's criticisms. Instead we'll be able to sift thru both, and sift out the nuggets of truth in the praise or the nuggets of truth in the criticism & use those nuggets to help us to grow & gain greater self-understanding; and if we are in touch with who we truly are, we'll have the ability to simply let go of those parts of the praise or the criticism which aren't accurate or helpful. This of course means we have to have a certain amount of personal security in who we are, & who we are in God, and be committed to a path of growing in self-awareness. This path is always painful, but sadly there's no 'painless' way to personal growth.

*If you know who you are,
neither praise nor criticism
will touch you*

Mother Teresa

While Susan & I were in Asia, and trying to help teams and groups work thru issues of conflict, we came across a tool that we found hugely helpful - so much so that we

have actually adopted it now in Servants, & we try to get all our people trained in it. It's a model called 'Empathetic Communication', or 'Non-Violent Communication, & it teaches that one of the goals of true relationship, and of true community is to develop empathy. You know what we mean by empathy right? - **empathy is a kind of mix of understanding coupled with compassion.** Now this model of communication teaches that the first person you need to be empathetic with is yourself - particularly in a moment of conflict. The second person you want to be empathetic with is the person you are in conflict with - but here's the trick - it's impossible to have true empathy & compassion for someone you are in conflict with, until you have first empathised with & had compassion on yourself. This is an extension of Jesus' teaching that **we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. If we don't love ourselves in healthy way, it's very hard to love our neighbour in a healthy way.** Having established this base, it then becomes possible to work out what the real source of the conflict is, that is what needs and values we hold that have been violated, and how we can resolve that. Again this is material that it's not really possible to cover in a 20 minute sermon, that Lynne & will deal with on the 20th, if you are able to come to that workshop.

THE SECOND TOOL that James gives us is that of not judging others, or at least letting mercy triumph over our natural tendency to judge others. This is extremely important for de-escalating conflict, or potential conflict, because in the context of a community or a team - or a friendship or a marriage - it is inevitable that we will from time to time let each other down, say the wrong thing, or rub each other up the wrong way. And with that we can choose to judge one another harshly; or we can choose to **let mercy triumph over judgement, & to assume the best rather than the worst of one another's motivation or intent**, even if that person's blew it, & their outer action wasn't the best. This is what it means to be gracious, and to show grace towards one another; and in fact we need to start with extending grace towards ourselves. Brennen Brown, a researcher who writes extensively on the topic of 'shame' & where shame comes from, has discovered thru her research this fact: the people who tend to be the most judgmental of themselves are the most judgmental of others; and people who are able to be compassionate towards themselves, are also the most able to be compassionate towards others.

THE THIRD TOOL is that just as we need control over the energy produced by anger, **we likewise need control around what comes out of our mouths & off our tongues** (& in this day & age, out of our finger tips when we write our emails or send our texts).

We are told in verses 9 thru to 12 of chapter 3 that our words should be used to bless others rather than curse them, that is to build others up rather than tear them down - and why, why should we do this? And here's where **TOOL NUMBER FOUR**

comes in - because **every other human being we meet**, no matter how different they are from us, or how low or high they rank socially, or how much we might disagree with their views or behaviour, **is made in the image of God**. Therefore, we should be listening to and speaking to one another with the kind of respect that is due to beings who bear the image of God. It is similar to that advice given in the book of Hebrews that we should welcome strangers, as if we were welcoming Angels. Because the reality is that we each are only a little lower than the Angels.

Something that is really interesting, if you look at the different theological emphases different Christian denominations have, & how this has effected how they live out their faith, there are some groups that have really focused on this truth that we are all made in the image of God - for example the Quakers. And so the Quakers (and not just Quakers, but many Christian groups) have refused to participate in warfare, because they argue - & I think rightly - that there can be no greater sin than to purposely harm or destroy another human being who bears the image of God

Whenever I worked with teams in Servants, where the pressure was on, & the potential for conflict was high, I would really encourage those teams that because we are made in the image of God, to **look for the gift that each team mate is, & the gift that each team mate brings** to the team or relationship or community. And focus on that more than on what they do that annoys us or irritates us. In youth work, in social work, in education and in most people centered work, people have come to realise that taking a strength-based approach - that is, focusing on what people do right more than focusing on what people do wrong, is a far more effective way of getting the best out of each other.

THE FIFTH KEY that is given us in James is from verse 18 of chapter 3 where James says

“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness”. So here James urges us to be a people who seek peace, and who are peacemakers - which of course echoes what Jesus said way back in Matthew 5:9

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God”

A really important distinction here is that **Jesus calls us to be peacemakers, rather than peacekeepers**. Let me explain. A peacekeeper, as I’m defining it here, is someone who has ‘a peace at any cost’ kind of approach. But as we have already seen in the life of Jesus he is fearless about confronting those in power who abuse that power or who fail to use that power to serve others. This is a really important lesson

PEACEMAKERS, RATHER THAN PEACEKEEPERS

for us NZers who tend to be bit conflict avoidant, and who tend to avoid naming the elephant in the room in the hope that if we ignore it, it will wander off home by itself. Unfortunately, those elephants seldom do, unless someone is brave enough to confront them.

Now people who have studied **group formation or the development of authentic community tell us that there are 4 clear stages - forming, storming, norming and performing.** Now we haven't got time today to unpack exactly what each of those 4 stages means, but suffice to say that a group or team or community can't get to a place of performing at its best & fulfilling its mission until it passes through the rough & tumble of healthy conflict (in this model called storming). If a group or community is unwilling to be really honest with one another, & is unable or unwilling to process conflict in a healthy way, in a way that is both passionate & respectful - then the best you can hope for, as I mentioned earlier, is a very superficial sense of community where people are pleasant & polite with one another, but there's no great depth of relationship or of shared mission.

But how do we process this fearful thing called conflict well? There are rules of engagement, some of which James has already given us. When we are processing conflict we need to listen well - both to the other person & to our own heart & to God. We need to let mercy triumph over judgement, and assume the best rather than the worst of our protagonist; we need to use our tongue and our words to build up, rather than tear down; we need to have eyes that see the other party as someone made in the image of God; we need to see and value the particular gift that they bring; and **we need to be peacemakers, committed to honesty & seeking justice, reconciliation and forgiveness.**

But the most important key of all, especially on this day, the Day of Pentecost, is that we invite the Spirit of Jesus into this process - into both the process of our community building, and into our process of how we work through conflict. We talked earlier about how James, as a sibling of Jesus didn't initially believe in Jesus, but somewhere along the line was converted & transformed, to the point where he becomes the leader of the Jerusalem church, and we read in I Cor 15:7 how James had his dramatic, life-changing encounter with the risen Jesus in the days after the resurrection. And we can experience that same transforming power too, Jesus has risen, and we can invite the Spirit of Jesus to come live in us individually and as a community, and to give us the courage and the passion to truly love one another, and to move forward to being doers of the word, and doers of the mission that Jesus has given us.
