

Enmity and Friendship with God

Lectionary texts: Psalm 54, James 3:13–4:10, and Mark 9:30–37

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Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here with you this morning and I'm grateful for the invitation to share in worship with you. I want to begin by bringing greetings from the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC). And, since TMTC is a centre of Conrad Grebel University College the greetings I bring are also from Grebel. For those of you that may not be familiar with TMTC, we are a teaching and research centre that helps form theological leadership for the church by providing and supporting graduate theological education from a Mennonite perspective in an ecumenical context. TMTC is supported by a number of Mennonite institutions in Canada and the US as well as by MC Canada, MCEC, and the Mennonite Education Agency and occupies a unique place. For one thing, it is one of the few places in North America in which Mennonites have a formal role in doctoral level theological education. We also have the immense privilege of operating within what I understand is the largest ecumenical consortium of theological colleges in North America, which means that conversations with Jesuits, Basilians, evangelical Anglicans, Anglo-Catholics, Eastern Christians, Orthodox, United, Presbyterians, and more besides are not only possible but do indeed actually happen. Perhaps most uniquely of all, TMTC exists solely for the benefit of students enrolled at institutions that are not Mennonite. There are currently about a dozen or so core students in Toronto who participate in our regular scholars forums and this past summer we hosted our biennial conference in Toronto, which featured 22 Mennonite graduate students from 15 different institutions across North America presenting part of their current research. TMTC also coordinates the Mennonite Scholars and Friends gatherings at the annual AAR/SBL meetings on behalf of 15 different Anabaptist related institutions across North America and is a connection point and a catalyst for many wider conversations. Needless to say, there is much energy and enthusiasm for the ongoing work of TMTC, both at Grebel and also at TST, and it is a great privilege for me to have the opportunity to work and learn alongside many gifted students. I know there are historical connections between this congregation and TMTC and I'm very pleased to be able to keep those connections alive by being here with you this morning.

I'd like to turn our attention to the lectionary texts, or, more specifically, to verses the lectionary—for reasons unknown to me—conveniently (strategically?) leaves out (Jas. 4:4–6). “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4).” Perhaps those selecting the lectionary texts thought this was simply too offensive for a somber Sunday morning service. Whatever the case, hearing a declaration like this, particularly if it is directed at one's audience, is sure to rouse a slumbering congregation if it is truly heard! Some scholars claim that this verse may well be the interpretive key to the entire letter of James. And, indeed, James articulates a stark choice: choose either to be friends of the world and so enemies of God or choose to be friends of God. For James, it seems, these are two irreconcilable choices that lead to two incommensurable ways of life and James gives us glimpses of these two choices throughout his short letter. As James tells us, friendship with the world breeds “envy and selfish ambition” as well as “disorder and wickedness of every kind” whereas friendship with God is characterized by peace, gentleness, a willingness to yield, mercy, and righteousness (Jas. 3:16–17).

For the moral tradition that James would have been most familiar with, envy was the most loathsome of all vices because it lead to all other evils. Indeed, Socrates regarded envy as the “ulcer of the soul.” So when James diagnoses the sickness in the community as being marked by the arrogance of the rich (cf. Jas. 2) and humiliation of the poor (cf. Jas. 5) these have their root in the basest of all human vices, which for James is envy. And, envy leads to a multitude of sins, the most serious of which seems to be arrogance for James: “As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil (Jas. 4:16).” If the argument that envy, which leads to arrogance, is the root of all evil seems a bit too tidy and simple, perhaps a bit removed from the murky moral underworlds we see displayed on our television screens and in our newsfeeds, make no mistake that for James this is serious business. So serious, in fact, that James links it to murder: “You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder (Jas. 4:2).” Killing the competition is the ultimate expression of envy and given our own consumerist and capitalist culture there are, perhaps, few places in the New Testament that are as pertinent to our own contemporary situation, which is likewise obsessed with the logic of envy. At least part of what James is suggesting is that the evil we see and experience in the world is not simply the result of unjust social structures, though I don’t think he would rule those out as a cause. For James, it is just as important to see that murder, for example, results from a diseased human freedom that eschews the gentleness and peace that issues from the “wisdom from above” and commits itself instead to the wisdom from below that distorts reality and makes such distortions systemic (cf. Jas. 3:13–17). Simply put, James seems to be suggesting that, in a significant way, violence is a disease of the human heart, a product of “cravings that are at war” within us (Jas. 4:1).

As an antidote to all of this, James calls for the virtues of humility and trust in God (Jas. 4:6–10). And, just as envy as the root of evil may seem too tidy on the surface, so too James’s constructive proposal may strike us as somewhat naïve or, at the very least, idealistic. But, here too, James refuses to let friendship with God dissolve into some ethereal and otherworldly abstraction to be realized only in the eschaton. Indeed, for James, friendship with the world as something to be avoided emphatically does *not* mean abandoning the world to its own devices or retreating to comfortable and safe enclaves where the messiness of the world fades into the background. Quite to the contrary, in fact, James emphasizes again and again that friendship with God is a distinctive and challenging communal way of life characterized by specific habits and practices. To become friends of God, James assures us, is not to be guaranteed a comfortable life but rather one beset with temptations and trials of all kinds in the face of which we must become part of a community that embodies God’s ways in the world. Lucky for us, James is quite specific about the fruits that such a community will bear: mercy (Jas. 2:13); solidarity with the poor and outcast (Jas. 2:15–16); patience in suffering (Jas. 5:7–11); care of the sick (Jas. 5:14–15); fraternal correction (Jas. 5:19–20). All of this fruit is the “harvest of righteousness...sown in peace for those who make peace (Jas. 3:18).”

Let’s take a step back. The rather brief Letter of James isn’t amongst the most popular or influential of the New Testament epistles, both of those titles belong, of course, to Paul’s numerous letters. Much of the history of interpretation of James has been influenced by the famous unintentional instigator of the Reformation, Martin Luther, who declared that James was a “straw epistle” and that he would like to throw “Jimmy into the stove.”¹ There were at least two significant problems with James for Luther, it seems. First, that James understood justification to be based upon works, which, for Luther, flatly contravened Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith and, second, that

¹ See *Luther’s Works* 34: 317.

James fails to mention the death and resurrection of Jesus and so did not preach Christ. Though Luther's influence on the history of the reception of James is profound it is by no means uncontested and many perspectives developed that did not see the stark contrast between James and Paul that Luther did. Because early Anabaptists held to the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith and because of the centrality they placed on the life of Jesus it would not be unreasonable to assume that early Anabaptist readings of James would be influenced by the Lutheran interpretation and likewise tend to relegate James to a subsidiary role. However, the evidence we have paints a different picture. Though we have no commentary on the Letter of James from early Anabaptists, over 50 references to James appear in various versions of the Anabaptist Concordance, which organized biblical passages under topical headings. James 5:12 ("Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.") was a key verse to which early Anabaptist leaders appealed for justification about refusing to swear oaths. So too, in the *Martyrs Mirror* there are many references to James and here, significantly, early Anabaptists also make connections between James and Jesus. For example, in a letter written to his mother from a prison in Antwerp in 1576, Hans Bret quotes both James 4:4 and links it to Jesus' teaching about entering through the narrow gate.² What seems to unite many of the early Anabaptist interpretation of James is the fact that they found in James a voice that articulated and gave meaning to their own experiences of suffering. Indeed, Menno Simons directly refutes Martin Luther's argument that James is a "strawy epistle" by emphasizing that one's life must conform to one's faith and that faith without works is dead, as James tells us (cf. Jas. 2:26).³ For many early Anabaptists who were imprisoned, tortured, and killed for their faith, James helped them to understand their experience of enmity with the world and to biblically ground their patient endurance, often at the expense of their own lives. These early Anabaptists knew, as James did, that becoming friends of God would demand everything of them.

Whereas for the early Anabaptists, the letter of James was understood as comforting balm, I wonder how we twenty first century Mennonites might understand it? Although we are certainly still a minority we are by no means a persecuted minority. On the contrary, most of us urban Mennonites are virtually indistinguishable from the wider culture in which we live. This is not to say that our faith does not distinguish us from our neighbours only that whatever fruits our faith might bear doesn't seem to get us into trouble in quite the same way that the fruits of the faith of the early Anabaptists did. Reading the letter of James, this fact alone—that we no longer seem to be getting into trouble—may in itself be cause for concern. Are we becoming friends of the world in James's sense? Of course, there are those amongst us that still do seem to get into trouble. In this respect I think in particular of the recent conviction of Steve Heinrichs, director of Indigenous-Settler Relations at MC Canada, for protesting the Trans Mountain pipeline development in BC. To highlight this example in particular is not to suggest that our faith requires all of us to become activists and to actively seek out trouble. This isn't what James counsels nor what I understand were the motivations behind Steve Heinrichs's involvement in the pipeline protest. Rather, it is to highlight the sense in which if friendship with God is going to be more than simply vacuous piety it must be visibly displayed not as an escape from the world but as a way of entering more deeply into the communal way of life that Jesus shows us. As we have seen, for James, the marks of such a community are characterized by peace, gentleness, mercy, care for the sick, the poor, and the outcast, and fraternal correction. Of course, there are many ways

² See van Bright, *Martyrs Mirror*, 1049.

³ See Wenger, ed. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 333.

in which we might become such a community and Steve Heinrichs's recent actions are just one. When I reflect on James's letter, however, another example too powerful not to mention leapt to my mind, namely the community called L'Arche. If you're not familiar with L'Arche, it began when Jean Vanier bought a small house in Trosly, France and invited two men with intellectual disabilities—Raphael Semi and Philippe Seux—to live with him. So began an experiment in radical and costly friendship that I would suggest embodies all of the marks James identifies. I want to leave you with a prayer from L'Arche that I think begins to get to the heart of what it might mean to become friends of God.

The L'Arche Prayer

Father, through Jesus our Lord and our brother,
We ask you to bless us.
Grant that L'Arche [Mennonite Fellowship of Montreal] be a true home
where the poor in spirit may find life,
where those who suffer may find hope.
Keep in your loving care all those who come.
Spirit of God, give us greatness of heart,
that we may welcome all those You send.
Make us compassionate,
that we may heal and bring peace.
Help us to see, to serve, and to love.
O Lord, through the hands of your little ones, bless us.
Through the eyes of those who are rejected, smile on us.
O Lord, grant freedom, fellowship and unity
to all your children,
and welcome everyone into Your kingdom.
Amen