

## The Sacred Act of Saving One Another

Sermon 115 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 3, 2021

James 5:13-20

There's a challenge going around right now on TikTok called, *devious lick*. It encourages students to steal random objects (like toilet paper or soap dispensers) or destroy property, particularly in school bathrooms, all for the purpose of capturing the vandalism on camera and posting it to their social media accounts in hopes of achieving 15 minutes of social media fame if their video were to become viral. Of course, teachers and administrators are beyond frustrated with this trend as it has caused predictable disciplinary problems in what was already going to be a challenging year. Still in the throes of a raging pandemic, masses of students went back to school after more than a year of online learning. Many of them having been deprived of social engagement and face to face human interaction for a long, long time. Judging by the nationwide participation in this *devious lick* TikTok challenge, it seems many of them have forgotten the basics of decent behavior in a communal setting.

Schools are having to adapt normal patterns to mitigate the potential destruction by closely monitoring bathrooms and making choices between mandatory group bathroom breaks and single stall options – every school is doing it differently, all of them trying to figure out what works in their setting. The truth of the matter is, this social regression of sorts has a significant impact on the whole community – not just those who participate in the TikTok challenge.

Though they may not be boasting about their deviant behaviors online, many adults also seem to have forgotten how to behave in public. Remember when folks started to fly again, passengers made a scene about mask mandates and other pandemic accommodations and protocols, sometimes even carrying on to the point of being removed from their planes because flight attendants could not maintain the peace in the midst of the resistance. And how about those of us who hit the roadways rather than the airways? With more and more people getting back on the roads, our patience with other drivers has plummeted during the pandemic. We enjoyed the days of having the lanes to ourselves, when everyone was working from home and our commutes weren't so bad. Now even the smallest inconvenience can really set us off, sending us into various stages of road rage as unkind words flow freely out of our mouths.

Perhaps this social regression, presumably brought on by months of isolation, distancing, and lack of face to face human interaction, has affected us all?

As our worlds have gotten smaller than ever, for many of us even as small as our own address, we have plunged into life-rhythms that either by choice or by circumstance limit our ability to understand and connect with one another. While the pandemic and all of its necessary isolation may have exacerbated the problem, I believe it is one that has been growing and festering among us long before 2020.

With so many voices offering conflicting and contradicting ideas about politics, society, economics, and even religion, it has become convenient to section ourselves off with other like-minded folk, friends, who offer familiar wisdom and who reinforce our pre-drawn conclusions about the world, about our neighbors, and even about our faith.

As much as we might think this emergence of new and different ideas *and* our tendency to group ourselves off with like-minded folks is a result of post-modernity, a product of twentieth and twenty-first century existence, all we have to do is pay attention to the words of our Bible to recognize that these patterns have been around for thousands of years. Fortunately though, this means that there might just be some applicable wisdom to be found in the pages of our sacred texts, ancient wisdom that speaks to our current predicament.

Consider the book of James, for example, written in the early years when the movement that would later become Christianity was just beginning to coalesce. This was a season in which believers were “hardly settled on matters of faith and life”<sup>1</sup> and theological ideas about the meaning and significance of Jesus’ life represented a wide spectrum. Perhaps it is this reason – because of the diversity of thought emerging in his setting – that James does not lay out a clear and decisive systematic theology, but rather focuses on what is more helpful. In the place of theology, James offers instructions on how to live in Christian community... or should we say communities.

The Christian assemblies – the early churches – were often tiny minorities existing within larger populations that were indifferent and sometimes even hostile to their beliefs. James is concerned that these early groups should not adopt or fall back into the values and behaviors of the surrounding populations. In other words, James believes that the way Christians live their lives really matters. For James, faith is not about saying the right things, espousing the right opinions on certain issues, or belonging to a specific political party – faith is lived every moment, every hour, every day... through our actions.

Of course this put James at odds with some of Paul’s writings which insist that salvation could come by faith alone – right belief is what assured us of God’s favor and acceptance. But James would disagree, or at least expand that overly simplified explanation. This conflict between James and Paul is why the reformer, Martin Luther, famously called the book of James “an epistle made of straw.” Luther, obviously preferred Paul’s approach.

Despite the fact that Luther’s critique influenced interpretation of this epistle for years to come, some scholars contend – and I think they may be onto something here – that James’ words were exactly what was needed in those days of theological fecundity and diversity. It is almost as if James is saying: the most important thing is not your doctrine of worship or ordination or baptism or marriage. What matters most is that we remember how to pray together, how to weep together, how to sing together, how to share life together and how to seek one another out when anything - be it sickness or sinfulness – begins to drive a wedge between us.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Douglas in *Feasting on the Word*. p 112

Another reformer by the name of Martin Luther, this one whose last name was King, had a similar message and seems to have been reading the book of James when he wrote these prophetic words in his own epistle to the white clergy of Birmingham in 1963:

*In a real sense all life is inter-related, all [men] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... this is the inter-related structure of reality."*

Even more recently, Amanda Gorman wrote these lines to the echoing the same call in her poem, *The Hill We Climb*:

*... We close the divide because we know, to put our  
future first,  
we must first put our differences aside.  
We lay down our arms  
so we can reach out our arms  
to one another...<sup>2</sup>*

With all of these voices throughout the ages calling us to build community rather than break it down, we so easily become preoccupied with our differences that coming together – in a very real sense – is the hardest but most important thing.

On this World Communion Sunday we are reminded that Christ's table is set in all kinds of rooms and the invitation is open to all kinds of people.

People who look like us and people who don't,  
people who think like us and people who don't...  
people who are hungry and people who are fed,  
people who are sick and people who are healthy,  
people who are grieving and worried,  
alone and afraid...

people who are far from home and people who are *bound* to their homes  
people who are mocked and marginalized  
people who are broken and in need of a friend

All kinds of people find themselves here today in search of Love that Jesus said was like living water... food we could eat and never go hungry again.

And it's so important that as we find ourselves a seat at this table, we recognize that here, we are not alone, but we are joined by all kinds of people whom God calls beloved. Therefore the work of salvation does not stop here, instead it begins here.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/a35279603/amanda-gorman-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb-transcript/>

It begins as our bodies are fed the bread of life and the cup of salvation.  
It begins here as we are strengthened for the journey  
It begins here so that when we stand back up, fortified and nourished, we can set our eyes outward, seeking out

those whose bodies prevented them from being here  
those whose brokenness has forged a wall between us and them  
those who have been shut out from communion for far too long  
those who are outcast and abandoned  
those for whom others seem to have no love

If we are to dine at this table, we are called to recognize that the Christian journey doesn't end here, as we receive these gifts of love and grace, but it begins here as we accept the invitation *and* the responsibility to carry it forward with love.

One scholar sums it up this way: faith that does not bear fruit in the moral life cannot save.

Remember that TikTok challenge? the one called *devious lick* where kids are vandalizing bathrooms and stealing things like toilet paper just for a few views on social media? Apparently there's a counter trend that's going viral. It's called *angelic yield* and the students participating in this challenge are replacing the stolen items – including replacing the cheap school-issued toilet paper with Charmin 3-ply, which is sure to make for a better experience for everyone.

Maybe we have something to learn from these students participating in the angelic yield challenge.

Rather than getting grouchy about those who seem to have forgotten how to behave in community, rather than bringing their own supplies of soap and toilet paper, they have set out to make life better for everyone... and they're challenging their peers to do the same.

They've accepted the invitation to love and they're taking it outward into their community.

They are embodying – in their own ways – the truth that if we are going to climb the hill of life together we have to first set our differences aside... *we must lay down our arms if we are to reach out our arms.*

We have to realize that we are *all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together in a single garment of destiny...*

If any among us is suffering... we should all pray  
If any is sick... we should all seek healing  
If any is cheerful... we should all sing songs of praise  
If any among us wanders... we should go and seek them out

For as James says: *whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a whole multitude of sins.*