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FAITH BROUGHT TO LIFE: TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS...GOD'S WAY

~ Scripture: James 1:19-21 ~

ILLUSTRATION

When I was in seminary, I had 2 different professors—one a Greek scholar and one a New Testament scholar.

The Greek teacher had a penchant for trivia. He would craft the most ridiculous tests. He would hand out pages of single-spaced trivia questions. None of them bore any real significance to anything except the upcoming test. We would ask him: “Which of these questions should we know for the test?” With a sardonic gleam in his eye, he would reply: “All of them!” This would spark discussions on whether “hate” was ever justified in Christian circles. On one quiz, he asked who the textbook was dedicated to. I still remember the answer (*the author's mother*). But that's about all I remember from two semesters of Greek with this guy. Regrettably, I lost my taste for language study; and to this day, I have no stomach for “Trivial Pursuit”.

My New Testament professor, on the other hand, was entirely different. As he lectured, he would occasionally stop and use a Latin phrase, “*Nota Bene*”. In the margins of the outlines he would pass out, you would see the abbreviation NB.

The phrase means “*Note Well*”. It seems to me that this professor was trying to help the class succeed. He wanted to help us get to what was most important—and understand it—unlike Mr. Trivia who only wanted to play with our minds.

SCRIPTURE

Likewise with James. As we come to the first verse of the little section we're going to consider today (chapter 1:19-21), it reminds me of my *Nota Bene* professor. James says in v. 19a:

“My dear brothers, take note of this”

Nota Bene! Pay close attention to what I'm saying here. You'll need it if you want your faith to be brought to life. . .if you want to live abundantly in Jesus.

What he's going to tell us isn't only true for us as individuals, but also for us as a community—as I will try to make clear as we go along. Let's hear what he has to say:

My dear brothers, take note of this:

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth (like taking off dirty clothes) and

the evil that is so prevalent (or, that leads to excess) and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save (transform) you.

From what we've seen in this series already (covering the first several verses of James, Chapter 1), life can be pretty chaotic:

- There is the chaos of going through trials & tribulations
- There is the anxiety that going after riches & trying to hold on to prosperity brings
- There is the chaos that temptations & sin cause

Now I've set up a BOWL with water to represent chaos. The waters can get quite choppy at times. Life is full of chaos, of ambiguity, of uncertainty. There's a lot stirring under the surface that leaves us not totally sure about what is going on around (and within) us, and also not very certain about what is coming. Most of us try:

- To run from it
- To create a false security (i.e.: by chasing after "things")
- To anesthetize ourselves (i.e.: with behaviors that are often sinful)
- To blame God for what's happening [last week: "No one should say, 'God is tempting me'" in v. 13]

** Here's what I want you to see this morning **

- CHAOS can be good
- CHAOS can be our friend
- Out of CHAOS something good can emerge, something that can bring change to our lives

After all, that's the creative genius of God! At Creation, He started with chaos and ended with this beautiful, well-ordered universe. God is at His best when He is bringing order out of chaos. When we hand Him the mess of our lives, it's truly amazing what He can do with it!

EXAMPLE: When Carol, my first wife died back in the mid-90's, our family was in thrown into chaos. But out of this turmoil, one of my kids got out of a horrendous relationship, got his sights set on attending the school of his dreams, graduated from there a couple years ago "with honors", and has completely turned his life around. Out of terrible chaos has come a marvelous recovery!

Nota Bene: Chaos is our friend!

But what is your reaction when you get into a situation of chaos? Probably the same as mine:

- We stop listening
- We get angry (often impulsively)

- We keep talking (often a means of distracting ourselves)

That's why James tells us to do just the opposite:

- Be quick to listen
- Be slow to speak
- Be slow to become angry

That's the formula for turning chaotic times into creative moments of change & transformation.

Take a look at my *bowl of chaos* again. When I stir it up, the water gets choppy and flies all over the place. Anybody feel like that's what is happening in your life right now? Feeling a little seasick? Different external & internal pressures can churn up the water—but one way or the other, we experience it as chaos.

Now watch what happens when I stick the spoon in the bowl and start spinning it around. A vortex opens in the middle of the chaos and the water starts to smooth out.

If you can insert something different into the chaos—something that will create a vortex—God can show you another way to live in the midst of the chaos.

I believe James is giving us 3 spoons to stir into the chaos that will open up a better way to respond to the turmoil, and stay in it without being overwhelmed or controlled by it.

Let's take a little closer look at the three.

I. SLOW TO SPEAK

Why does James instruct us to be “slow to speak”?

Because often in times of chaos we turn a difficult situation over & over in our mind. . .we start jumping to conclusions. . .we create scenarios of what might happen. All of this serves only to agitate us and in the long run create more pain.

Being slow to speak is more than simply being quiet! It is learning to reflect on the possible purpose or meaning in the chaos. What is God saying to us in this? We must learn “*to be still and know that He is God*” (just like *Elijah* did) and look for God in the midst of the difficult.

It may be necessary to stay in the chaos until the vortex opens for us.

Remember *Joseph*? He sat in prison in Egypt for nearly two years wondering how this could have happened to him. But that was the time needed to align circumstances in Egypt so that the Pharaoh would need Joseph to assist him in dealing with the famine. What would have happened if Joseph could've “talked” his way out of prison before the time was right? What divine purpose might have been thwarted?

Can you think of a time in your life when God would not let you “hurry or worry” your way out of a particular situation, but kept you in that place much longer than you wanted to be? Sometimes it's a matter of waiting in the chaos until God reveals another way for you to walk through it. Be slow to speak. . .let discernment develop. . .wait for God—you won't be disappointed!

II. SLOW TO ANGER

Times of chaos often evoke strong emotional responses. Anger is an attempt to solve the problem, to force things back to normal.

That won't help either! If anything, it'll create more chaos. And, anger can become toxic—meanign it can create bitterness & resentment, which tear us (our families, our church) apart. Anger led to the first murder in Genesis 4, when *Cain* became furiously angry with his brother *Abel* .

I am not talking about getting angry when someone cuts in front of you on the highway OR being angry about what's happening in Iraq.

I am talking about heated, prolonged anger as a way of handling issues & people. This kind of anger will cause us to self-destruct. . .it will tear us down. . .it will undo all the good we've done.

Verse 20 says: "*our anger does not bring about the righteousness God desires*". It doesn't get done what God wants done!

EXAMPLES: A teacher's anger will not accomplish what (s)he wants (to regain control, to direct).

A teacher's anger will usually backfire, causing students to lose respect.

You can always achieve more with words of encouragement. . .and with a LOOK!

A parent's or spouse's anger won't accomplish much either.

It usually just shuts down communication.

With kids, it can produce and even more stubborn resistance.

Some of us here have grown up in angry homes. We are still feeling the effect of it today. My father used anger as a way of "taking care of business". He was very effective at it. In fact he was my role model. I thought that's how you got things done—till I ran into some brick walls. I had to learn the difference between taking care of business *Dad's way* ~vs.~ *God's way* [hence the title of this sermon].

III. QUICK TO LISTEN

God gave us 2 ears and 1 mouth. That's the right proportion [2:1], which means we should listen twice as much as we talk. Sometimes our math is a little off, and we use the proportion [1/2 : 1], thinking that with twice as many ears we only have to listen half as much.

Sometimes it helps to listen—and listen we must—to a faithful friend, a parent, or the gentle nudges of the Holy Spirit. Maybe a Stephen Minister can help us remember (recall) what matters most. . .

Because in times of panic and distress, we forget just about everything that matters. We forget God's faithfulness. . .we forget the call he's placed on our lives. . .we forget many of the commitments we've made to God and to others. . .

Because chaos makes us feel insecure and unstable. It's easy to forget that God is in control during these moments and that we can trust him "for better or for worse". When you do trust him, it starts that vortex which becomes an irresistible force that draws in His power.

Remember, too, we live in community (as Dexter UMC)! And the greatest gift we can give each other is a listening ear—an ear that doesn't just hear words, but listens to the heart.

CONCLUSION

So, next time you read these three directives, mark them *Nota Bene*. These simple but potent words can morph *chaos* into *creation* and give you the opportunity to cooperate with God in one of His most favorite of all activities: making all things new while freeing us from all that holds us back.

That is God's way of taking care of business!

Let's PRAY: Lord, we recognize the chaos that's in our lives this morning may be an opportunity for you to work. If indeed you are up to something, don't let us miss the possibilities for something new and radical. It is our desire to cooperate with you as you accomplish great things in our lives. AMEN!