

SPIRIT ENABLED LIFTING

I want to thank Annie for the well-chosen songs. As has often been the case, I almost feel like I don't need to preach. Thank you.

Our New Testament reading today is again from the book of James. While we have heard a lot from James in the last few weeks, it is not a prominent book of the NT. In fact, Martin Luther did not think it should be in the Bible at all. He thought it to be “a right strawy epistle.” While it does not contain the name of Jesus, it is believed to have been written by Jesus' brother James, who emerged as a leader of the church in its early days. By now Christians, largely of Jewish roots, were scattered to the far corners of the Roman Empire. Some lacked strong leadership and central teaching as they sought to deal with the external challenges of being a religious minority and handling the internal conflicts that threatened to tear the fledgling communities apart. In many respects, the teachings of James are most fitting for the current time.

Hear the words from James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for^[a] those who make peace. Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet^[b] something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Most of us have lived through a difficult time. For many of us these past – almost – two years have been difficult. Of course, there is the pandemic, but then looking around the world there have been forest fires, government transition in Afghanistan, and the earthquake in Haiti, which by now is almost forgotten. Add to these more local concerns for our own well-being and those we love. Times like these feel like heavy lifting.

In looking back to see how we made it through difficult times, we will see it involved some heavy lifting. By heavy lifting I mean an inner resolve to face the difficulty and perhaps reaching out to the resources available to us. Heavy lifting need not be debilitating or even that heavy.

My cycling partner and I often discuss news items when we pause for our breaks along the way. Recently we have acknowledged we are reading less news because it seems so discouraging. As I reflect, maybe I am in need of a refresher course on spirit enabled lifting in the face of life's difficulties.

Our theme continues to be, Growing in God: Recovering. Experience the recovery, I believe we all long for, will require some spirit enabled lifting. As we gather for worship week to week, we should be encouraged that we do not lift alone. Our opening hymn, “Blessed Assurance” speaks of the way God is with

us in Jesus. Also, we are blessed to be part of a faith community with ample resources to support and encourage each other.

If as I suggest, I might need a refresher course on lifting from a spiritual core, the scriptures for today aptly fit the bill for required reading. Many of us are inspired to self-improvement by an image of some sort. Psalm 1 paints an image of one totally attuned to God's teaching and stands fit as a deeply rooted tree to weather the storms of life. The James text might well be considered the basic training manual showing us steps to get into good spiritual condition. Now if you are like me, I don't always get the full impact of words alone. I need a how-to video to get things clear in my head. A text from Mark 9, not read today, where Jesus takes a little child to say this is how you should seek to follow me, is further instructive.

Please pause with me in prayer: *In the middle of the realities of life, you come to us as the source and sustainer of life. We see you in Jesus, in your written Word, in creation and in your Spirit moving among us. As we reflect on you word before us today encourage us in the living of our days. Amen.*

Two stories that recall are instructive when faced with some heavy lifting.

When I was in voluntary service in Cincinnati, Ohio, one of our unit members loved to plan ragtime music. The problem was we did not have a piano. Somehow one of us got wind of a piano available either for free or at very little cost. It was an older piano that needed some repairs. When we went to look at it, we took a piano tuner with us to determine if it was even worth dragging home. After playing a few cords he determined it was indeed a worthwhile acquisition and we proceeded to load it on the truck.

Now I had never lifted a piano before. All I knew was that it looked heavy. After a few quick instructions on how to lift, the piano tuner went into action. You need to know that the piano tuner was of slight build and a few inches shorter than myself and my friend at the other end of the piano. He was also legally blind having only 10% vision. But he knew how to lift a piano. While my friend and I wondered how to grab hold, the other end literally came floating off the floor. We eventually got our end up and loaded the piano on the truck. For the piano tuner, lifting a piano was easy because he was trained to lift from his inner core.

In my home community, barn raisings are common. A barn raising is always under the supervision of a master carpenter. Before the day appointed for the actual raising, he oversees the preparation of the many timbers required to build the frame for the barn. Dozens of men follow his instruction in the cutting, drilling, and chopping. On the appointed day, the timbers are carried to the floor of the barn and assembled section by section.

As each section is ready, the lifting began. Ropes are attached, pike poles prepared in the proper locations. Then the foreman lines up the by now 100 men in the appropriate places. Next comes very specific admonition to follow only his instruction. First, the frame is lifted by hand as high as the men can reach. Shorter pike poles are placed underneath to brace the frame. Next longer pike poles are used to get the frame to the height where the ropes can pull it up the rest of the way.

The one time I was present at a barn raising, I was still too young to participate in the lifting. I recall how easily those frames were lifted into place as dozens of men lifted and pulled with each admonition, "Yo hee! Yo hee!" By evening the barn was standing with much of the roofing and siding already in place. When many people come together and listen to the voice of the master carpenter, seemingly heavy loads float into place.

Knowing how to lift, whether physically heavy loads or emotionally difficult circumstances, takes training and cooperation. Pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zone often takes a spark of inspiration. An image of a well toned body builder might at some point in our lives have encouraged us to take on our own weight training. Or I think of the woman, who in her travels in Germany tasted a cake that so delighted her that she spent years attempting to bake a cake just like it. The challenges of life are often met by encouragement to stretch our limits.

In my reading of the texts, Psalm 1 serves as the inspiration to train for spirit enabled lifting. Who would not like to be like a strong sturdy tree standing on the river's edge with deep roots able to withstand flooding, wind and whatever came along? Obviously, the picture of the tree is an image of one strong in God's teaching.

It is no accident that Psalm 1 is placed at the beginning of the Psalms. The psalms follow the book of Job, where Job is put to all manner of spiritual and physical testing. Prior to the Book of Job, God's people endured slavery, spent many years wandering in the wilderness and endured generations of exile. Along the way they were given the Law to serve as a guide to successful living as God's chosen people. Key to successful living was ordering their lives according to the will of God. The Law was to unify the people of God. In many respects, the Psalms offer a poetic and hymnic way of expressing the teaching of the Law of God. Psalm 1 stands as the introduction to this wonderful collection of literature. The image of a sturdy tree serves as the inspiration to become a person well rooted in God's teaching.

Sometimes words themselves are not instructive enough for me. Today we have the advantage of how-to YouTube videos on almost any subject. On one job, I needed to cut a cultured marble countertop to size. I knew it could be done but was uncertain how. After watching a brief video and buying a \$15 sawblade the cut was very easy, although a little dusty. Good thing I was outside.

Mark 9, the passage not read today, serves this purpose for me. Jesus told his disciples – again - that he would suffer and die, and three days later rise again. As usual, they did not quite get what Jesus was talking about. They understood he would be establishing some sort of a kingdom but clearly misunderstood its nature. Assuming it would be a political kingdom they began arguing as to who would get the most desired political appointments. Later that day Jesus asked what they were arguing about. Sheepishly they admitted they were arguing over who was the greatest. That's when Jesus took a young child and put it in their midst as an instructive video.

In Greek, the word for little child has double meaning. It refers to both a direct offspring and a slave, as in a servant serving a superior. Jesus then concludes, ***“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”***

As I worked through these texts, I began to understand that the heavy lifting of life requires learning how to lift from our inner core, like the piano tuner, and yielding to the voice of the master carpenter as at a barn raising. While the James passage offers some instruction to that end it also points to the pitfalls if one does not lift from an inner core and listen to the voice of the master.

As I said earlier, James is written to fragile communities in danger of being torn apart by external persecution and internal strife. The main question being asked in this reading is, *“are you a friend of the world or of God?”* When push come to shove – when heavy lifting is required - do we listen to the wisdom of our own interests and desires or the wisdom of God, as in Psalm 1?

One commentator suggests we need to be listening to the voice of our inner spiritual core. But that begs a question, to what station is our inner core tuned? She goes on to note that core is about much more than our inner being. The word core comes from an old French word meaning heart. So, the question really becomes whether or not we are listening to our heart attuned to God's teaching.

Few Christians would argue that the heart of our faith is Jesus. As Saviour, he is the author of our salvation and, as a wise teacher offers counsel that guides us in the way of God's heart. Those who fail to do this would be like at a barn raising if one person said to those around him, "the master carpenter does not know what he is talking about, listen to me." Immediately there would be turmoil, the section of the frame would fall breaking some of the timbers and perhaps even result in the loss of life.

Those who make life decisions in difficult times listening to and lifting from their inner core are like the piano tuner. When Jesus is at the heart of our spiritual core, we are like a young child open to instruction and ready to listen to the voice of the master carpenter. Those who walk in this way demonstrate the virtues of charity, humility and peacemaking in everyday life.

The world in which we live today seems to be going in an opposite direction. Opposing viewpoints are becoming entrenched in a hate filled we - them mentality. The issue of vaccination is a good case in point. While I have very definite views on this matter, my concern here is not the views we hold, but how we relate to those who hold a view different from our own. While we all argue it is our right to hold the view that we do, we also need to be asking, at what point does the expression of my right infringe on the rights of another? Apart from that, the lifting around this matter will become heavier as the time goes on. But if we can learn to exercise charity, humility and a peacemaking stance toward each other, we will find the lifting to be easier. The weight might even float up as a heavy piano and a section of a barn frame.

At Grace, we also have some heavy lifting to do over the next year as I indicated in the announcements. The lifting to which I refer is primarily around discerning how we want to move forward as a congregation. No doubt, we have various points of view on these matters. If these viewpoints are expressed in a confrontational and divisive manner, the lifting will be heavy indeed. But if we can train our inner spiritual core to be attuned to the heart of Jesus and be attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit in our midst, we will discover the potentially heavy load is lighter. In fact, the lifting might even be enjoyable and lead to further growth as we recover God's vision for us in this time and place. Amen.

The hymn that Annie has chosen as the Hymn of Response appropriately attunes our hearts in the way of Jesus. On the screen "Just a Closer Walk with Thee."