

Heaven and Earth, World vs. God?

James 3:16-4:6, Mark 9:30-37

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My friends, this has been one of those weeks when creating a sermon has come hard. The passage from James and the Gospel teaching don't seem connected - to each other or to the tumultuous clamor of anxious voices as we face big decisions about our music program. I will say no more about that - I know many of you feel you've heard quite enough. But I have been distracted and torn by all that is going on here now, and frankly, my confidence in the value of my preaching has been shaky.

What do we need to hear? What does God have to say to us, and where can I find some of that in me to offer to you today? Finally, from the Collect and from the Letter of James, from talking to Bill - who is always great at asking the "so what?" question, some inspiration began to flicker. My head and heart began holding hands and taking some tentative steps.

The Collect and the Epistle talk about the worldly and the heavenly as if they are opposed - in conflict - two realms at war. This from the Collect: "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly" ...things that pass away vs. things that endure. This from James: "The wisdom from above is ...pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield...without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy". He goes on to say that friendship with the world is enmity with God, and I just can't accept that - I need to understand it in some other way.

Many do believe this - that the world and the heavenly are in conflict, that loving God means rejecting the pleasures that this life offers, keeping ourselves detached, pious, focused on a distant God and a future heaven. These folks can feel guilty a lot of the time, because if loving God means hating the world, they can't do it. Or they really do try to be friends with God by seeing the world as an alien place, a waiting room only for the joys of some promised heavenly kingdom - later on, somewhere else. It's a theology that may appeal to terrorists, but it feels mistaken. It flies in the face of a loving God pouring holy spirit and being into this creation, into us.

As a young person in church, I heard this seeming opposition of the earthly and the heavenly. It disturbed and puzzled me, then as now. I don't think of spirit and flesh, heaven and earth as separate realities in competition with each other, as either/or options for our faith. I think, rather, that heaven and earth, flesh and spirit are truly and deeply bound together, and our task is not to choose one over the other but to embrace their union - in us, and in this world. The prayer Jesus gave us asks that this be true - that God's kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth (here and now) as it is in heaven - that other realm that the prayer implies needs to be made a reality in this world, in our lives.

On Thursday at my colleague group, another clergyman told us about his recent sabbatical retreat with the noted Buddhist holy man Thich Nhat Hahn. My friend said that with this wise and gentle scholar, the whole idea of heaven had really opened up for him as something here and now, within us, all around us, whereas before, he'd always thought about God's kingdom as something coming, to be sure, but later, much later.

So, do we ignore James' words and our Collect because they seem at odds with our experience - or can we find clues here that can help us lead our lives? Actually, upon closer examination, I find some words that ring true, at least for me.

James mentions a wisdom from above - but then, further on, he speaks of God's spirit within us. He says "God yearns jealously for the spirit he has made to dwell in us". One of my favorite Prayer Book prayers asks that a spirit of wisdom will save us from all false choices - all of this implies God within us. James also suggests the problem - this apparent enmity between the world and God - is within us, in the cravings that are at war within us.

Who of us has not known this war, this conflict within? It's what makes hard decisions hard; it's what makes morality sometimes so ambiguous! We are conflicted, not between world and God, but between values, such as kindness and truth, patience and boldness, courage and humility. It is our conflicting values that torture us when we try to best live in the world and best live in relation with the divine, with God. All of us have been in situations where values collide, where we have to choose, or find middle ground, and most of these times we need to do this with others - our families, our church communities, our citizenry. We need to make choices that often force us to betray one value by upholding another. Anyone who has ever sought a divorce, or an abortion or thought deeply about just war or how to achieve more economic justice or reduce global warming knows this.

This is not the world vs. God - it's trying to be faithful to God's presence in this world and in our own hearts. It's trying to discern, often with others, the best way forward, given real situations and not abstractions. It's being willing to realize that indecision brings results every bit as consequential as acting.

I do not believe Jesus calls us to reject the world in God's name. Jesus embraced the world fully, in all its brokenness. He loved and forgave sinners; he was not a recluse, not an ascetic, but a lover of this world and the God who creates and sustains it. For Jesus, God's Kingdom was a present and continuing reality, and his teachings were full of glimpses of that kingdom - in mustard seeds and birds of the air and lilies and prostitutes who loved much, and parents who begged for their children's healing and tax collectors who cheated and in the meek and the poor and the sick who found reason to follow him in faith - without proof, or guarantee or known reward. Jesus welcomed God's presence in his very being and in everyone he met and in the world around him.

I have a hard time with today's Collect and with some of what James seems to be saying. I don't think we must be enemies of the world to be friends of God - or vice versa. Our world is broken in so many ways, but it is God's world even so - shot through with love and possibility. We face tragedy, but we live in hope - we do not turn our backs on God or the world - for they are all one.

I do think we must wrestle within ourselves, and among ourselves, with the conflicting values and pulls on our hearts and minds, to love this God who gives us this world, who gives us each other, and who gives us this church as a blessed community in which to practice. Amen.