**Tammeus notes for 9-19-21 sermon at First Pres., Lake Forest, Ill.**

Psalm 54

James 3:13-18

“When ‘Wisdom’ Comes from the Wrong Place”

Good morning. I’ve often wanted to preach to my sisters, and today I get to fulfill one-third of that dream. So, listen up, Mary Watanabe.

Please pray with me: Eternal God in Christ, you bring light out of darkness, health out of sickness, joy out of sorrow and life out of death. So please take these inadequate words of mine and make them your word for us today. For I pray it in the name of your very Word, Christ Jesus. Amen.

It’s become my custom, when possible, to start my remarks to any group with a land acknowledgement, which today means recognizing that the land on which this church sits is considered ancestral tribal land by the Great Sioux Nation. If you’re not familiar with land acknowledgments and the moral obligations of people who now occupy land once controlled by Native Americans, I hope you will learn about them. It’s a small step, but it’s something.

It’s my joy to be with you today and to have a chance later to speak to, I hope, many of you about my new book, *Love, Loss and Endurance*, which tells the story of the countless ways the murder of my and Mary’s nephew in the 9/11 terrorist attacks slammed into our family. Beyond that story, the book explores the question of how people get drawn into extremism that leads to violence and what, if anything, we can do to unplug such radicalism.

As we think about such painful matters, let’s first look at one of the lectionary readings for today from the New Testament book of James. At my Presbyterian church in Kansas City, my pastors rarely preach from the weekly lectionary selections, preferring, instead, to preach series of sermons on particular topics. But I decided to see what the lectionary readings offered today that might have something to do with current events and with our experience just last weekend of commemorating the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Well, James, indeed, has something useful to say to us today, and we would do well to listen.

James wants us to know that faith isn’t worth much if it doesn’t produce acts of love, mercy and compassion. In other words, if the Bible, our confessions of faith and the body and blood of Christ that we consume in Holy Communion aren’t eventually metabolized as acts of kindness, charity and grace, we’re not doing it right. But James also tries to teach us the difference between what he calls “the wisdom that comes down from above” and the *alleged* wisdom that “is from the earth,” which he describes as “natural and demonic.” When James uses the term “earth,” by the way, he’s not referring to what we’ve come to call Mother Nature. Rather, he’s talking about the depraved minds of some human beings.

We saw examples of such *earthly* wisdom in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in many other examples of extremism before and after that — examples with which all of us are familiar. Sometimes, as we know, this earthly wisdom disguises itself as being rooted in religious thinking. But do you know how to tell that such supposedly religious thinking is not just false but also a destructive sham? Any time religious teachings lead people to view others as less than fully human or lead them to want to oppress others in some way, you can be sure that it’s not a product of healthy religion and that whoever is teaching such things has it wrong.

I want to be clear that all faith traditions can be and sometimes are subverted or distorted in this way. Yes, the twisted version of Islam that the terrorists bought into certainly was an example of this. But so is the kind of Christianity that slaveholders in the U.S. before the Civil War used to justify their evil. And in our time so is the kind of Christianity that encourages people to try to retain the white supremacy that was built into our nation’s founding documents or to advocate for Christian nationalism or to insist that our LGBTQ brothers and sisters have no full place in the life of the church. To get to those positions requires a subversion and distortion of scripture and of the foundational teachings of Jesus.

Every religion produces extremists, it turns out. And as Rabbi Rachel Mikvah points out in her recent book, *Dangerous Religious Ideas*, almost any religious idea has the potential to be used in dangerous ways. In fact, I have spent a lot of my post-9/11 professional life as a journalist helping people understand that the terrorists who hijacked planes that day badly disfigured the ancient and honorable religion of Islam and used it in dangerous, indeed murderous, ways.

The kind of simplistic, binary thinking I’m talking about imagines that it has all the answers before it even hears the questions. It has no room for alternative thinking, no room for mystery, for ambiguity, for paradox, for uncertainty, for doubt. Clearly people who think like this haven’t read my book called *The Value of Doubt*. In that book I argue that if you’re not part of a faith community that allows you to ask the hard questions of faith, you’ll never develop a faith that can sustain you in good times and bad. After all, the opposite of faith is not doubt. Rather, the opposite of faith is false certitude. Doubt, instead, can be, and often is, a road to faith.

So the 9/11 terrorists bought into the warped theology and geo-politics taught to them by Osama bin Laden and similar leaders. In doing that, they paid no attention to the kind of divine wisdom about which James wrote.

That wisdom, James tells us, is “pure, peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair and genuine.” *That* doesn’t describe the 9/11 terrorists, nor does it describe the white supremacist young man who murdered nine African-American people at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, S.C., in 2015. Nor does it describe the neo-Nazi who, in 2014 in the Kansas City area, murdered the father and son of my friend Mindy Corporon and the wife of my friend Jim LaManno. Nor does it describe the radical insurrectionists who stormed our nation’s Capitol last Jan. 6, some of them carrying Jesus signs. The list of people who fall outside the description of wisdom from above that James gives us is long and sad and, I’m afraid, growing.

Is this just the human condition? Are we doomed to repeat the violence that has pock-marked history for generation after generation?

Psalm 54 gives voice to the angst behind that question when it says, in the Common English Bible translation, “The proud have come up against me; violent people want me dead. They pay no attention to God.”

It’s an anguished cry that has been heard in nearly every generation, including ours. And the Bible wouldn’t be doing its job if it didn’t somehow reflect that terrible kind of human experience, including the experience of God seeming to be absent from us, of God even having abandoned us.

But the Bible is also a testament to the reality that we need not be doomed to live in cycle after cycle of violence. The Bible gives us reason after reason not just to hope but to be part of the solution. And to demand that God be God and help us.

I know it may sound a little presumptuous to demand that God be God, but there are times when we really must do exactly that — and in the face of extremists who violate God’s teachings at every turn, that demand of God becomes more important than ever. The French Reformed theologian Jacques Ellul, in his book *Hope in Time of Abandonment,* explains what I mean.

Ellul says that hope is humanity’s answer to God’s silence. Do you ever sense that Radio God has gone off the air? Well, you’re far from alone.

Listen to what Ellul says about this in his 1970s non-gender-inclusive language: “Hope comes alive only in the dreary silence of God, in our loneliness before a closed heaven, in our abandonment. God is silent, so it’s man who is going to speak. But he is not going to speak in God’s place, nor in order to decorate the silence, nor in taking his *own* word for a Word from God. Man is going to express his hope that God’s silence is neither basic nor final, nor a cancellation of what we had laid hold of as a Word from God.”

Then Elllul adds this: “When God is silent, he has to be made to talk. When God turns away, he has to be made to turn back to us again. When God seems dead, he has to be made to exist. . .In a sense,” Ellul says, “it could be said that hope is blasphemous. It actually rejects the decision of God’s silence.”

In my own experience, I have learned that one of the ways to incarnate hope in dark times is to act. I mentioned my friend Mindy Corporon and the murder of her 14-year-old son and her father on Palm Sunday of 2014 on the Jewish Community Center campus in suburban Kansas City. Mindy, by the way, has written the afterward for my new book.

Did Mindy simply shrivel up and retreat from this evil world after an extreme antisemite who was trying to kill Jews instead murdered three Christians that day — Christians who for various good reasons happened to be at two Jewish institutions? No. Her reaction to what happened, in fact, started the very evening of the shootings.

I helped two friends of mine — one a rabbi, one an Episcopal priest — create a prayer vigil service that evening so people could gather and comfort one another in the wake of that horrific violence. Of all people, Mindy herself showed up that night, to our surprise, and spoke to the hundreds of people who attended. She wanted everyone, including students who were her son’s classmates, to know that evil would not win and that they must care for one another in a crisis like this.

But she didn’t stop with that remarkable ad-libbed talk that night. She began to work to create an annual week-long event in Kansas City to promote kindness and interfaith understanding. She calls it “Give Seven Days,” and each year people gather in interfaith workshops and at other events to learn how to live out the love that Jesus commanded his followers to do and that other faith traditions also promote. Earlier this year Mindy released her own book about this journey. It’s called *Healing a Shattered Soul*. It will give you a path toward the kind of divine wisdom that James wrote about.

In her book, Mindy says it took some time to discern what she was supposed to do in response to the murders of her son and father, but journaling helped. She writes this: “With effort, practice and yes, even time, I have learned to use my breath as a conduit to channel the pain, allowing the pain to flow but not to debilitate me. With concentrated effort, I sit quietly with a pen in hand and a journal on my lap and write. Most times I start with a prayer — the Lord’s Prayer.”

The question for us today — even if we have not experienced the sort of searing loss that Mindy has or that 9/11 families like Mary’s and mine have — is what injury to the world and its people are we being called to respond to. Where, in other words, is the spirit of the living Christ already at work in the world healing people, restoring wholeness? And how can we join in that work? It’s an especially good question to ask as (and if) we emerge more fully from this Covid pandemic that battered the world so badly and as we try to imagine what the future holds for Afghanistan and for so many people who now have escaped that country and its brutal rulers, the Taliban.

Your healing work can start in your own family, which, like my extended family, may have divisions over matters of politics and the direction of our nation. Or it may start with something in your own neighborhood, a shut-in or a single mother trying to hold together her children. Or it could begin with someone who has lost a job and doesn’t know where to turn next. That was my younger daughter’s situation until last week. And last weekend she drove up here to spend time with some of her cousins and aunt and uncle to marinate in family love as she faced her crisis.

Or it can be a national or world issue. What specifically can you do for the cause of racial justice? What can you do to work against the degradation of the Earth’s environment? How can you support the thousands of refugees fleeing from atrocious and violent governments around the world? You know the issues that need attention and you know which ones speak to your heart.

You can’t, of course, fix everything. You have to recognize your own limits. But also recognize that God has no limits. You bring your two fish and five loaves to the table and God will find a way to grow them and use them. That kind of *re*action to our world is what James means by wisdom that comes from above. And remember that the word *re*action includes the word action.

I’m aware, of course, that like a lot of the people in my own congregation in Kansas City, many of you already are in the arena, giving of yourselves, reflecting the divine wisdom and standing against the kind of destructive, strait-jacketed religious thinking that leads to violence and loss. And I’m grateful for what you do.

But perhaps now is a time to reassess whether new times call for new and different commitments. Perhaps the living spirit of Christ is active meeting another need to which you might devote yourself, too.

So look around, pray about it, seek discernment about it. And if you sense that even God has abandoned you or other people who need God’s help, be assertive with God in the way that Job was. And remember that no matter his reputation, Job was not a patient man. Wrestle with God, if you need to. And remember that the very word Israel means exactly that — to wrestle with God. It’s in our DNA.

Jacques Ellul says we have a right to call on God “even if we are sinners (and we are), even if we have deserved to have God abandon us (and we have indeed deserved it), even if the Church is a parody of the Church unworthy of God (and she is a parody of the Church), even if our contemporary theology is a heaping of vanity upon discourse and of discourse upon misunderstanding (and it is that). After all this has been acknowledged and much more besides,” Ellul writes, “we still refuse to accept God’s leaving us and ceasing to speak. . .Hope never ceases to shout in God’s ears.”

So there’s your assignment. Shout in God’s ear. Ask God to be God and to show us the divine wisdom again that can counter the monochromatic religious thinking that makes no room for uncertainty and that leads to violence. Your life and mine may depend on you getting in touch with the wisdom that comes from above, not what James calls earthly wisdom, which often leads to catastrophic results. So let’s commit to that. May it be so. Amen.

**Benediction**: Our service within these walls has ended, but now our service to the world begins. So go out and find where the living Christ is at work. Discover what’s breaking God’s heart and resolve to help fix it. And may our triune God go with you all along the way. Amen.