In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text for this morning’s sermon is not the text I mean to focus on. It is simply the text that expresses most perfectly the subject of this sermon. So, let me begin by lifting up Jeremiah’s cry to the LORD. Jeremiah’s preaching - though it is the true Word of God - has earned him the wrath of his townsfolk. They mean to do him in. But the Lord reveals their plan to Jeremiah, who then cries out to his Lord, to the God who “triest the heart”:

20But, O LORD of hosts, who judgeth righteously, who triest the heart and the mind, let me see thy vengeance upon them, for to thee have I committed my cause. (Jeremiah 11:20, RSV)

I do not want to speak now about Jeremiah’s cry for vengeance or even his committing his cause to the Lord. I simply want to pick up Jeremiah’s conviction that the Lord cares about the human heart. He tries it, searches it, weighs it, seeks for purity in it. Naturally the Lord cares about our conduct and about those offenses that can land us in jail. But also the Lord cares about the human heart -- about the wellspring from which flows our conduct, both for the good and for the bad.

Especially I want to focus on the relationship between our hearts and our words. Alas, sometimes our words can let down our hearts. If we were poets or songwriters, perhaps we would be better at putting into words the affection within our hearts. Or, more happily, it could be that our words are better than our hearts. Maybe you know what that is like. Your heart might be in turmoil, filled with conflicting emotions, including the desire to have no dealings with such and such a person. Yet, you take a big breath, try to keep a large perspective on things, remember Luther’s exhortation toward charitable interpretations, and you go ahead and manage to speak words of peace and truth. But whether we are poets or not, we have to speak. We can’t just sit there forever like a bump on the log. We have to break forth into words. Then, whether our hearts are angry or happy, frustrated or enthusiastic, disliking the person standing before us or head over heels in love with that, whatever the state of our hearts, we should strive for words that are both true and helpful.
THE ABASHED DISCIPLES

Today’s Epistle Lesson especially treats the question of the human heart and our words and dealings with one another, and that will be my main text. But let me approach that text by taking a glance at this morning’s Gospel Lesson. The disciples are caught abashed:

33 And they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” 34 But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34, RSV)

This is not the kind of discussion that is likely to promote peace among the disciples. Our reading is from Mark 9. In the very next chapter - Mark 10 - there is a similar discussion, and there it becomes articulate that such discussions are disrupting the apostolic fellowship:

35 And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” 36 And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” 37 And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (Mark 10:35-36, RSV)

Jesus deals wisely, as always, with James and John and their desire for seats of glory. He uses their request as an occasion for teaching his disciples something important about the connection between greatness and humility in the kingdom. So, that is good. But still, some damage has been done along the way:

And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John. (Mark 10:41, KJV)

These discussions about greatness in the kingdom of Christ prove divisive and harm the fellowship.

TRUTH TO TELL

But what interests me is the perspective of James and John on this matter of greatness. From their point of view, what might have been at stake was nothing less than the truth. They seem to be practical men, planning for the future, planning for the organizational efficiency of Christ’s kingdom, thinking that it was high time to sort out who among them was to be the greatest in that kingdom. Who was to be President and who Vice President? Oh, and by the way, did we mention that we, James and John, are part of the inner circle with Jesus, along with Peter?
We are the ones who just a little while ago, at the start of Mark 9, were witnesses to the Transfiguration of our Lord up on the mountain, again, along with Peter. We are the ones with an authoritative insight to the nature of Christ – we and Peter. To us has been vouchsafed an insight that had not been granted to the other nine disciples. And so, isn’t it the way of truth to acknowledge that and to start making plans for us to be high rulers in the coming kingdom?

I can imagine James and John reasoning in this way. And I do not accuse them of insincerity or of covetousness for power. Their motives might have been pure. St. Paul often did a similar sort of thing. He claimed apostolic authority. He explained it, defended it, and asserted it. But you never get the impression that he claims such authority for the sake of his own ego, but rather for his surpassing devotion to Jesus and to the proclamation of the gospel.

It is this matter of motives that interests me. It is this matter of the heart. Paul’s motives for his claim seem pure and innocent. The motives of James and John might likewise have been pure and innocent. Motives, ambitions, and the desires of the heart are hard for outsiders to sort out. Sometimes they are even hard for the person himself or herself to sort out. But that Christians should seek purity of heart is pretty clear from the Bible. Jesus called for such purity. And the letter of James does the same thing. So, let’s turn now to this morning’s Epistle Lesson, James Chapters Three and Four.

JAMES

By the way, this James is not the James of the inner three disciples, Peter, James, and John – at least according to the traditional picture. Rather, this James is the pastor of the congregation in Jerusalem. He is the one who presided over the Jerusalem Council that sorted out the mission of the early church, with Peter preaching to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. This James is the one who addresses the scattered church through his letter.

You have probably heard that Martin Luther did not much like the Epistle of James, calling it an “epistle of straw.”¹ Luther doubted the apostolic nature of James because he felt that it did not sufficiently proclaim either the cross or the resurrection of Jesus. And you have to respect Luther’s passion here. But perhaps a more charitable interpretation of James is to think of it as a sermon from the dear old man, James. In fact, we could picture it as one of those transcribed sermons, like those of St. Augustine or St. Chrysostom, in which scribes sat in the congregation and wrote down the words of the sermon – words that were

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¹ “In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” (Luther, M. (1999, c1960). Vol. 35: Luther's Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (35:362). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.)
originally simply oral discourse that would have been lost to the ages except that faithful witnesses recorded the words. Likewise with James. Think of it as a sermon from the apostle, but then remember the limitations of a sermon. I mean, I am keenly aware that any particular sermon I preach is incomplete. I just can’t fit everything into one sermon. Don’t have the talent for it. So I have to trust you folks to come back next Sunday and to hear some more of the old, old faith of the church.

Likewise, with the Epistle of James. Luther is right that it is weak on proclaiming the cross and resurrection of Jesus. On the other hand, it is strong – very strong – in carrying on the preaching of Jesus. Especially James is strong on lifting up the concern of Jesus for the human heart. To remind you of a single example of such preaching of our Lord, remember the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus asks that not only should the hand drop the stone about to execute some wrath in this world against the enemy, but also that the heart itself should become more pure and gentle:

43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

James does a similar thing in this morning’s Epistle Lesson when it comes to the matter of how we talk with one another and how we deal one with another. James speaks of a false kind of wisdom. It might be speaking the truth – the very Gospel truth, like James and John bragging that they had been with Jesus upon the Mount of Transfiguration. But it is a false wisdom because it is so contentious. It might be the truth, but is spoken from envy and bitterness and selfish ambition. So, here is St. James’ description of this bad kind of wisdom:

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.

The thing that ails this bad kind of wisdom is not that it is deceitful. It cannot be accused of departing from the truth. Rather, its motives and its method are wrong. It falls short of the apostolic ideal of “speaking the truth with love” (Ephesians 4:15).

And next we hear St. James’ description of true wisdom:

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. (James 3:15-17, NRSV)
Hope Springs

I am drawn to this matter of the heart that is pure and peaceable and gentle because it seems to me that some of the most intense human relationships sometimes flounder over the question of how to say the truth. The issue is not deceit, but simply how to say something, with what spirit to say it.

Let me give you a recent example from the movies. There is a movie playing these days in our neighborhood called “Hope Springs.” It stars Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones. They play a longtime married couple named Kay and Arnold Soames. They live in Omaha, Nebraska, where Arnold is an accountant and Kay works at a Coldwater Creek store.

Arnold is a grouchy old guy in this movie, played well by craggy face Tommy Lee Jones. Arnold is married to… well, goodness, he’s married to Meryl Streep! She’s beautiful and patient and saintly. And as the movie goes by, you begin to see that Arnold is devoted to his wife. He still deeply loves her after their thirty years of marriage. And she deeply loves him. But their marriage has lost its romance. They sleep in separate bedrooms. They do not really kiss anymore. They follow their routines, but life is dry. For her birthday, Arnold buys her a hot water heater. Well, they need one, don’t they? Arnold seems content with this manner of life, but Kay is not. So, Kay pays for them to go away for a week of intense couples counseling at a quaint seacoast town in Maine.

Arnold puts up a fuss the whole way. At first he refuses to go, but she says that she is going with him or without him, and so at the last moment, he comes too. He murmurs and complains all the time. They arrive in this picturesque town, and all he talks about is how expensive everything is and how cut off they are from their normal routines. “Look at this. I can’t get but one bar on my cell phone.”

The counselor is named Dr. Bernie Feld, played by Steve Carell – not as a comedian this time, but rather as a gentle, but relentlessly probing therapist.

For me, one of the most poignant scenes is one in the office where Arnold is becoming more and more angry with Dr. Feld. He warns Dr. Feld that Dr. Feld is trying to get Arnold to do something dangerous. He is trying to get Arnold to say things that once said, cannot be unsaid.

And Dr. Feld replies, “What’s so bad about that.” And Kay agrees. She says it would be better to know, much better to know the truth.

So, Arnold does speak. And it turns out that he has some sorrows of his own in their marriage. He has his own disappointments. He says that he has tried to do the right things. He has never been unfaithful to Kay. He works hard, takes care of Kay and the kids. But he has his sorrows too.

Well, you could say that his speaking of his sorrows is the thing that begins the process of healing and that sets Kay and Arnold on the comeback trail. And the movie does have a happy ending.
But it is not quite true that it is the mere *speaking* of the sorrows that does the trick. It is also the *spirit* with which Arnold and Kay speak the truth to one another.

What Arnold and Kay manage to do is to avoid the bitterness and envy of which St. James writes. They manage to speak in such a way that their words do not betray their love for one another. They have good hearts. They have the kind of hearts St. James speak of: pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Their words might be heavy, and they might fear hurting the feelings of their beloved, but they manage to speak the truth with love.

**PURITY AT EACH STEP**

That is the ideal St. James is lifting up. He is concerned that Christians should seek purity in every part of the chain of communication, lest our tongues start a forest fire of destruction in our lives and in our relationships. He urges us to strive for purity and peace in each link of our reaching out to one another – in our hearts, our ambitions, and the words we choose when speaking with one another.

In a recent wedding sermon here at Immanuel, the preacher noted that when people talk about love, they sometimes say “We fell in love” or “We were overcome by love,” as if love is something that randomly happens to some lucky people. But real love is not such a fragile thing. It is not something that simply happens to us. It is also something that we nurture and try to get better at all the time. St. James urges us on in that effort.

The good news is that our Triune God not only fell in love with our human race, but never once fell into bitterness or resentfulness with us, though I fear that we too often prove a disappointment to him. The Bible does not shy away from picturing the holy disciples as letting Jesus down. The culmination of their holy walk with him is that one of them betrayed our Lord, one denied him, and all fled and abandoned him. But notice the constancy of spirit of Jesus, so that even on the cross he was able to pray, Father, forgive. St. James would have us seek such Christ-like purity and constancy in our own hearts, words, and deeds, to the benefit of those who deal with us and depend on us, and to the glory of him whose name we bear, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.