

Listen, Mind the (Spiritual) Gap

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

August 29, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Thank you, James for being our reader this morning. How wonderful to hear the Song of Songs, that letter of a person to their beloved, in a man's voice. It's interesting that this love letter made it into the Bible. It is passionate, sincere, and very human. A "Love Letter".

The other reading from James is a "love letter" too; sometimes James gets labelled an Epistle, a letter, but scholars really consider it "wisdom" literature – like the book of Proverbs. The writer offers wisdom to their "beloved children" in the form of a series of more than 100 imperatives.¹ There is a sense of urgency, because the Israelites are now living in Canaan, the "promised land" and their Torah teachings are colliding with a new culture.

There is a gap between the teachings and how to live them, "Mind the spiritual gap!" James says to ancients and moderns alike; the Gap between knowledge and wisdom.² *Knowledge* meaning to know in my mind ideas about God, and *Wisdom* meaning living and acting in ways that reflect what we know of and about God.

I remember as a child with my parents when we would go on an adventure to Toronto. Maybe you remember a time like this when there was a gap that your parents helped you cross safely. I descended into the subway tunnel, hearing the whoosh of a train leaving, *ding dong dong*, off it goes. I remember being impatient, asking when our train would arrive.

I see that painted line on the platform, about a half metre from the track way down below. I step close to that line, and my mom or dad gently pulls me back. In London's subway called the Tube, I saw this phrase, something like the graphic on screen – Mind the Gap.

James calls us to pay attention - Mind the Spiritual Gap – the gap between knowledge and wisdom.

Two imperatives from today's reading that I think stand out. I imagine James lovingly calling the beloved children to pay attention with a sense of urgency. So, I'd like you to repeat the phrase after me:

First, let's say out loud: Be doers of the word, not merely hearers. (repeat) Great!

Don't repeat this, but, James is pretty pointed as he elaborates about what he means here. "Hearers," he says, "are like those who look at themselves in a mirror. [New Revised Standard Version]

Do you ever have any moments like that, watching yourself rather than acting, speaking, living it? Me too.

¹ "Exegetical Perspective", Aaron L. Uitti. Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

² Casey Thornburgh Sigmon's commentary on James 1: 17-27. <https://www.workingpreacher.org>

The other imperative from the letter of James that I'd like you to repeat after me are these three lines:

Religion that pleases God must be pure

...help the needy...

and do not let this world make you evil. [Contemporary English Version]

Martin Luther called James the "Epistle of straw" because he felt that it hinged salvation too much on what we do. Luther's focus was on Grace alone, a gift from God. You can't earn it – can't work for it. But isn't James bang on as we look at our culture today? Times have not changed at all. We learn Biblical teachings, over and over again, but we don't apply them fully to our lives – we cherry pick our favourites.

"What does the Lord require of you?" Asks the prophet Micah *"To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* [New International Version]

Knowing your scriptures is great. But minding that spiritual gap between knowledge and wisdom: between knowing that God loves us and sharing that love extravagantly. Mind the Gap between knowing we are blessed, loved, and developing the heart and mind muscle memory to live out that love. Not just to live it minimally, but to live that love extravagantly through our words and actions.

Mind the Gaps; and there are some daunting gaps to mind. The gap between our heads and our hearts; the gap between believing in and saying we follow Jesus, and actually showing it. James is concerned about the world, the culture, threatening to make the beloved evil. I wonder if there are dangers in our world today that might obscure the spiritual gaps around us today; social media that keeps us connected, yet it also enables the dissemination of misinformation and bad behaviour, even bullying. Gaps even, dare I say, threaten our religious organizations – James calls this bad religion. Churches preach love, but, when asked to welcome a neighbour in who provokes us, when our call is to unconditionally love, we equivocate. James was speaking to an early church, but the imperatives offered to the beloved by James are equally offered to us.

Mind the spiritual Gap, beloved children. Why don't we repeat those gems of wisdom from James:

Let us be doers of the word, not merely hearers (repeat)

Religion that pleases God must be pure (repeat)

...help the needy... (repeat)

and let us not let this world make us evil. (repeat)... Amen