

“Contaminants”

James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Some may wonder why I’m wearing a golden-colored stole. It’s ordinary time, after all, and green is the color of the day.

I’m wearing it to give you an idea of what happened on August 6th, 2015 when, according to the Denver Post, three million gallons of contaminated waste was accidentally released from the Gold King Mine, north of Silverton, Colorado, into a tributary of the Animas River in San Juan County. The normally pristine mountain water looked this color. You can see pictures by “Googling” “Animas River 2015 contamination.”

Besides coloring the water this golden color, the release polluted the river with high levels of sediment and metals, including lead and arsenic. Warnings were sent immediately to farmers and recreational river users. It was ten days before the river could be used again by these groups, and even then they were warned to wash afterwards.

The release was caused by heavy machinery used by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the very agency entrusted with preventing this kind of accident.

Or consider that 19 months ago (at about 8:55 PM ET on February 3, 2023), a Norfolk Southern freight train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, about a quarter-mile west of the Ohio-Pennsylvania state line. Twenty of the affected cars contained hazardous materials, including vinyl chloride, ethylene glycol, ethylhexyl acrylate, butyl acrylate and isobutylene. Clean-up and legal settlements are still on-going.

Contaminants. They are all about us. From asbestos—once regarded as the miracle mineral and now feared as the cause of various types of cancer—to sprays, paints and all manner of compromises to our food, hardly a week goes by without hearing of some risk exposure just by going about one’s daily business.

Today's readings talk about spiritual contaminants. The two—the contamination of the Animas River and the contamination of our souls—are not unrelated. You know the translation of the Spanish name “Animas?” “Souls.” The “River of Souls” was contaminated.

Some contaminants we have no control over. Whether they are foreign matter entering our bodies, minds or spirits, we cannot control everything around us. But James and Mark make it quite clear that there is much we **do** have control over. Paraphrasing a long-forgotten pundit, we are challenged not so much by questions we cannot answer as we are by answers we cannot escape.

One answer, according to James, is that by and large anger doesn't work. Self-help gurus could only hope to be as insightful and helpful as James: *“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness.”* (James 1:19b-20) Here's an ordinary example within which you may choose your medium. Did you ever have a—choose one or more—telephone call/e-mail/letter/text go unanswered? Did you ever ascribe all sorts of unsavory, discourteous and impolite motives to the offender?

If you have not done these things, you are a wise and patient Christian. I confess that I have. I am not proud of that but it is the truth. And what I find, more often than not, is that the presumed guilty party either never received the intended communication or had some life crisis or was overwhelmed with circumstances beyond their control.

So I have learned two important things. First, I have learned that jumping to conclusion does not qualify as exercise. It serves no one. And anger related to such rush to judgment diminishes my Christian witness.

Second, I have learned to pick up the telephone and ask, *“Are you okay? Because I tried to reach you and didn't hear back.”* And invariably I learn what I have just told you, that they didn't get the message or that some unavoidable complication prevented their response. When James writes, *“You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves,”* these strategies for anger avoidance are one practical application of his exhortation.

It is practical because it results in kindness that puts our faith into action. My eldest son said to me, after he had grown and moved out on his own *“Dad, I can’t believe how patient you are.”* This came as quite a surprise because I do not view myself as a patient person, even though it is a virtue that I try to cultivate. To have my own flesh and blood—someone with whom I navigated adolescence and a messy bedroom and several car wrecks, for heaven’s sake—to have my own flesh and blood call me patient was high praise. Though I am not always patient, I try to cultivate this instead of anger because life is already hard: why make it harder?

How might we practice patience beyond our families? It’s Labor Day weekend. In my experience, workers are under appreciated, especially in retail. I often say that the hardest job in the world is working retail. So consider this challenge: the next time you go into a store: smile at the clerk, call them by name if you have it, speak softly and politely, and thank them for serving you. I guarantee you will get a smile. Life is hard: why make it harder?

Combating the reality of life’s toughness is part of what I think James means when he exhorts us to *“keep the world from contaminating us.”* It is part of the reason why many of us are in church. We come for a respite from the storm, for healing and wholeness, for solace and comfort. We don’t then have to use much imagination to picture Jesus’ encounter with the religious leaders in today’s story from Mark. They are leaders who have misunderstood what contaminates us. They major in minors, focusing on outward form rather than inward substance. They get hung up on rules and rituals.

Is there a place in religion for rules and rituals? What a question to ask on a Communion Sunday! Of course! In fact, the root of the word “religion” is from the Latin meaning “to bind,” as in being bound by rules. But when the weightier matters of the law are ignored in exchange for ceremonial forms that we think please God, then according to Jesus the mine entrance to our souls becomes ruptured and, like the Gold King Mine, pours out all manner of things that contaminate us. Jesus gave us the list in Mark 7:21. I don’t need to repeat it but it is worthy of re-reading and remembering.

What I do think bears repeating is how we keep these things from pouring out of us. It is to put our religious priorities in the right place: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties, as James says; to love God and neighbor through sacrificial service as Jesus says in so many other places, giving us examples in his life-saving ministry. We can do this by a changed attitude—choosing patience over anger—and by a changed behavior—showing kindness instead of haste—and a changed value system—choosing to care for people over caring for rules for rules' sake.

These changes thwart the contamination of the world around us. They are an answer to the invitation I give at every celebration of Holy Communion:

*Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins,
and are in love and charity with your neighbors,
and intend to lead a new life,
following the commandments of God
and walking henceforth in his holy ways: draw near with faith,
and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort,
and make your humble confession to almighty God.*

Exhibiting patience, being kind, caring for people: these cleanse us for the ministry to which God calls all of us. These changes give us the peace we so often crave, the peace of Christ, the peace *“that passes all understanding.”* Amen.