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"I do the best imitation of myself" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond
(09/01/2024, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray.

All my God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we pray, Amen.

The self-titled debut album of Ben Folds V, a three-person band out of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, came out in the fall of 1995, which also happened to be my senior year of high school.

The first time I listened to this music, it was a revelation because it brought together two things that I loved, but previously had not realized could go together, piano and rock.

Really more of a punk sensibility.

I loved lots of hardcore bands as a high school student, and I also played classical piano.

So this music was not only catchy, but layered and complex with lots of chords and voicings

I had never encountered before.

Like many other seniors in high school, people on the cusp of adulthood.

People in the edge of this identity shaping decade there is their 20s, I was relieved to see a way that someone else had combined two things and made a new thing, that their identity could be stretched and could grow into that new thing as well.

So on that debut album, there is a song called The Best Imitation of Myself, it begins with these lyrics, I feel like a quote out of context with holding the rest, so I can be for you what you want to see.

I've got the gesture and sounds, got the timing down, it's uncanny, yeah, you'd think it was me.

Do you think I should take a class to lose my southern accent?
Did I make knee up or make the face till it stuck?
I do the best imitation of myself.
Thankfully then folds did not take a class to lose his southern
accent, nor did I, though
sometimes people are so surprised when I tell them I'm from Louisiana.
With this song captures that feeling that many of us have that really
what we are doing
in life everywhere, and maybe especially at church, is the best
imitation of ourselves.
We are a culture obsessed with the question of identity, and we have
been for some time,
Michelle to maintain a French philosopher writing 500 years ago said
basically the same
thing as been folds.
She says we humans, we're all patchwork, so shapeless and diverse in
composition that
each bit, each moment plays its own game, and there is, he says, as
much difference between
us and ourselves as between us and others.
And look, you don't need me to tell you that the past 25 years of
technology have heightened,
and in many cases completely overwhelmed with the formation of our
identities.
That's why social media is so dangerous for young people.
I'll never forget those solid days of early Facebook in which it
seemed that I could just
pick and choose my favorite bands, my favorite foods, my favorite
brands, and then what I would
get back was a digital self, myself projected out into the world for
everyone to see.
And dear God, I hoped they liked it.
And if we do a fairly good job of figuring out who we are, we then
have to negotiate living
out our identities in the space of a community.
We see this in families in which each person stakes a claim to their
own selfhood, their
own personality, while constantly adjusting that self based on the
dynamics of the whole.
Or unfortunately at times they don't adjust.
There's friction and even separation.
We see it in all sorts of ways, in all sorts of communities, we
desperately want a place
where we belong, where we can find our people, where we can see the
things that are important
to us reflected back to us, and when they are not reflected back to
us.
Or when contrasting values are reflected back to us, we often don't
know what to do.
Thankfully, we have two pieces of wisdom before us this morning to

help with these questions
of identity, meaning, and purpose.

The first is the book of James, which is essentially a collection of
advice through early Christians
living in Jerusalem and beyond.

The questions James explores in this advice column are questions not
really too far from
our own experience.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in difficult
circumstances?

Does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in the midst of a society and
even a church that

is shot through with all kinds of deep divisions?

Where do I find my identity as a follower of Jesus in the midst of all
this?

Who do we say that Jesus is, and of course looking deep within
ourselves we also ask,

who do people say that I am?

And James's advice, at first, seems contradictory.

For what he really seems to be saying is that because the tongue is so
dangerous, because

any act of public witness or testimony can be so easily
misinterpreted, maybe it's just

better not to say anything at all.

Maybe it's better not to teach or to preach or to engage in any kind
of public conversation,

better not to talk politics around the dinner table, better not to
have the difficult

conversation about why you're not coming home for Thanksgiving this
year, better not

to put the yard sign out that you really wanted to, better not to do
anything to rock the

boat, better not to give any one ideas, better not to claim the many
facets of your identity

in any public way, better just to keep quiet.

I mean isn't James right?

Think of the forest fires in your own family, your own hometown, your
own circle of friends,

your community, your school, your university, your church.

Think of all the ways in which your world has been set ablaze by
incendiary speech, language

that is meant to divide, language that is meant to turn us against one
another, language

that is deliberately calculated to make us feel alienated, isolated
and alone.

What does any of this have to do with the gospel?

Why is it so important to followers of Jesus that we tame the tongue,
that we exercise caution

in speech that we restrain ourselves?

James is addressed to those in a society of deep division and

conflict, to those struggling
to live in community with others, especially those they might disagree
with, and for those
going through times of anxiety and change, and if that doesn't apply
to any of you you
can just go ahead and leave.

Okay, just want to make sure, okay that's what I thought.

So to all those people, to all we people, to all of us on the way,
people who feel lost
and alone and confused, James offers a profound word of comfort that
we are made in the image
and likeness of God, that is the answer to all of our anxiety about
identity.

That guarantees and secures our identities in Christ, each of us
individually, and that
is the only way that we will ever be able to relate to one another, as
divinely stamped
image verors of God.

James is so quick to remind us of this fact because often we would
rather not be reminded

that we are all made in the image and likeness of God, all that all
means all, that we are

not in the privileged position ourselves of deciding who is made in
the image of God

and who is not, because every human being is.

Sometimes that image is dimmed or obscured either in ourselves or in
others, but there

is something foundationally true about every human being, that they
bear the image of

the Creator.

This is so terribly inconvenient.

It would be better if the then diagram of my enemies and God's enemies
were a circle.

But God makes friends with all sorts of scandalous people.

And God makes friends with my enemies too.

There's a logic to the world's way of thinking, the same world that
likes to light forest fires

with just a spark of a carelessly tossed word or phrase that is
demeaning and dehumanizing.

This is the logic of conquest, the logic of winning at all costs, the
logic that sees

that the only remedy for the brutality and violence of the world is
more brutality and violence.

In Mark's Gospel, when Jesus tells the disciples that the victory of
God will actually come

at great cost, the cost of his own life, the cost of the cross,
suffering in betrayal

and loss, Peter cannot understand or accept it.

If Jesus is indeed a Messiah, then Jesus will win, not lose.

Jesus will set the world ablaze.

Jesus will triumph.

And yet to do so in this way would mean cursing those who are made in the image and likeness of God.

And that is a path the Son of God is not to take.

And so Jesus' rebuke of Peter while stinging his powerful and just, merciful and holy,

Jesus is saying that this attitude of conquest and victory, the world's way is not God's way.

God's way is patience and humble and kind.

God's way is merciful and loving and universal in scope.

God's way is life-giving, not death-dealing.

And the fiery rhetoric of hate that comes from the very depths of hell that use James's

words is death-dealing.

Language in teaching that so division and hatred and greed are death-dealing cursing those

who are made in the image and likeness of God is death-dealing, like trying to quench

your thirst with saltwater.

Who do people say that I am?

Is Jesus' first question?

Outward directed Jesus asks the same question that we ask daily of the people who surround us.

We express ourselves for the sake of others so that there are perceptions of us will line

up with our perceptions of ourselves.

We desperately care what others think of us.

And that is natural and it is human.

And of course, all of the answers that disciples give Jesus are inaccurate or incomplete.

All of the answers that others give us to are inaccurate or incomplete, shot through

with all the complexities of human life and behavior, shot through with others' concerns

and perceptions, their anxieties and their fears.

Who do you say that I am?

Is Jesus' second question?

Jesus is not concerned ultimately with any perception other than the one he knows to

be true that he is the self-giving sacrificial Messiah, the Lamb of God, who takes away

the sin of the world.

And so when we ask this second question of God, who do you say that I am?

We receive an answer more beautiful and wonderful and mysterious than we could have ever imagined.

We receive the truth.

The truth that enables us to live and to move and to have our being
and the author and
sustainer of life.

We receive an answer that enables us to relate in healing ways to
creation and to the people
around us, even those we think to be enemies.

We receive an answer that enables us to be agents of Christ's peace,
to put out the
fires of hatred and negativity wherever we see them.

For the answer we receive is this, you are my child, you are the
beloved one of God,
you are one in whom I delight.

And no matter how much confusion, indivision and distrust the world
may throw your way,
you can always rest in that answer.

Amen.