

The Cherry Trees
James 5:7-11, 13-18
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We love cherries in the summer. Our family can put away a whole bag of them in one sitting, piling up pits on a napkin. Almost a decade ago, we bought two cherry trees to plant in our yard. They were both healthy saplings, carefully researched for their ability to produce delicious fruit. The last thing we wanted was sour cherries. We also chose the spot to plant them carefully, a place where they would receive plenty of sunlight and water. Then, we waited.

For most of us, 2021 has not been a Top 5 Year. You can probably say the same thing about 2020, and while I know a few folks who have celebrated weddings and new births and a few others who found silver in more than just the lining of these past 20 months or so, I think that (if given the option) most of us would trade these two years for whatever was behind Door #3. That means that, as we approach the calendar's home stretch, we may find ourselves—for the second Thanksgiving in a row—asking what exactly we have to be thankful for.

If that is you, then I do not blame you at all. My guess is that an unfortunate number of people regularly feel the weight of more than turkey at Thanksgiving, the blues more than the reds and greens at Christmas, and a sadness and stress that comes with the darkening days of the end of the year. This stupid virus has made things harder, but I suspect that many years the actual giving of thanks requires intentionality and focus.

There are a number of different approaches to navigating oneself toward thankfulness, strategies we can employ and steps we can take that push us to be more aware of the goodness in our lives and more thankful. At least four of these emphases appear in these eleven verses at the end of James.

You have, no doubt, heard of the “starving children in Africa” mentality, one which directs us to be grateful for what we have because someone somewhere in the world is worse off. There have been times, over the course of the past year, where I have heard people express gratitude because they don't live in Afghanistan, or in regions ravaged by wildfires, or in states with governments making incompetent decisions (which I've heard applied to both California and Texas). The catch with this mentality is that it quickly turns into “at least that's not my life,” and that is more an attitude of desperate relief than of thankfulness. It trains us to be thankful for what we aren't instead of what we are, for what we don't have instead of what we do have.

At its roots, however, this mentality is a strategy that pushes us to grow in empathy. We are living through a sharp decrease in Americans' ability to engage in empathy.¹ Despite this, or perhaps because of it, “empathy” as a concept has surged to the forefront of our social understanding the past decade or two. It is a broad term that gets used without being defined, a word that means different things to different people.² Some seem to use “empathy” simply to refer to compassion or charity, but the way that James promotes “empathy” is different from just kindness, different from looking at others primarily with distanced commiseration.

¹ Hall, Judith & Mark Leary. “[The U.S. Has an Empathy Deficit.](#)” *Scientific American*. 17 September 2020. Accessed 16 November 2021.

² Ibid.

In these concluding verses of James, the push toward empathy first shows up in verse 9, “Beloved, do not grumble against one another.” It reappears at the end of the book, and in both places, the key to empathy seems to be to distinguish it from pity. James does not push us to look at others and feel bad for them; James pushes us to look at others and to feel what they feel.

So instead of thinking “I’m glad *that’s* not me,” James tells us to ponder deeply “what if that were me?” Delving into another person’s life ideally causes us to gain the perspective and ability to encourage people more authentically. This is critical to James’s understanding of empathy: do not grumble *against* each other but rather cheer and celebrate, cough and confess and cry *with* each other. See through someone else’s eyes and then unite with them.

The reason we bought two cherry trees was that they needed each other to cross-pollinate and produce. There are types of trees that are self-pollinating, but the saplings we found rely on each other in order to flourish. They are dependent on community in order to bear fruit.

When we unite, we enter into community...and if you’ve been worshipping with us throughout the past several weeks, you’re likely not surprised to find James once again promoting the idea of community. Here he does it by nudging his readers to join together in times when we typically isolate, in times of sickness and of shame. We are inclined, particularly these past few years, to detach during times of illness or embarrassment, but James encourages us—when we find ourselves in these situations—to come together...physically, close enough to offer a holy touch. Joining together in these times gives us the strength to persevere through them.

The strength to persevere leads to James’s next path to thanksgiving, which is to remain patient.

Despite our best efforts, the cherry saplings we planted didn’t fare so well. That first year, we tended them carefully with plant food and water, and they rewarded us with about a dozen cherries altogether. Meanwhile, deer ate the rest of the fruit and destroyed the bark of both trees, preventing them from growing at all. One of them sustained enough damage that it died that first winter. Without its mate, the other one stopped producing fruit. We kept waiting for it to die, too, but it’s still holding on, even though it hasn’t grown at all. The deer continue to snack on it, but apparently it’s not enough to put it under.

Today’s verses start with a call toward patience, and James names the prophets as examples of that virtue. The men that James identifies—Job and Elijah—have stories that are long and messy and to some extent unresolved. There is no conclusion here that feels neat and clean and rewarding. Patience does not pay off with a guaranteed result. Sometimes the cherry tree dies. Throughout their trials, which are plentiful and severe, Job and Elijah find a way to endure. They fuel their faiths through waiting instead of becoming disconsolate because of it. True patience actually pays off in the waiting, anticipation that is in itself edifying.

James also uses the image of harvest to advocate for patience, bookending this section with that image. We live in a city, and for many of us, harvest is more of an ethereal concept, something we read about in picture books and scripture or glance at on the side of the road when driving through the sandhills. For us, harvest can be influenced by fertilizer and technology and irrigation. In James’s era, harvest was much more a life or death situation and much more a matter of faith.

In each of James's first three approaches toward increasing thankfulness—be empathic, be communal, and be patient—he emphasizes that these are ways to encourage and sources of encouragement. We feel what others feel; that's encouraging. We live in community and are shaped and strengthened by others; that's encouraging. We learn to wait in a way that is life-giving instead of life-draining; that's encouraging. Our blessings are rooted in this idea of encouragement.

And James's final instruction to increase thankfulness is also intended to be a source of inspiration, the instruction to pray. Whether the members of the early church are suffering, cheerful, sick, or guilty of sin, James wants them to pray. He believes this is a panacea, an appropriate response for all settings, the ultimate source of encouragement.

Thus the final verses in James emphasize that we are to be empathic, communal, patient, and prayerful. Out of all of this, all of these directives combined, James seems to feel enormously uplifted. This is surprising, because throughout most of the letter, James has not sounded particularly empathic or patient or heartening, and James's initial readers would have been trying to make church work while plagued by disorganization and persecution. Despite all of this, James takes heart in these qualities, which speaks to just how powerful they are.

This week, as we collectively ponder the things in our lives that we are grateful for, my mind turns toward those who have encouraged me. In particular, throughout this past year, I have been made keenly aware of the support from worshipers at multiple churches who have been praying for me as I wandered through the wilderness between settings. Some of them are at the church where I previously served, some are here, and some are at churches who just care about me or my family or the ministry opportunities for this congregation. I have had friends kindheartedly pay me compliments in a way that left them more vulnerable than I expected. My family has drawn closer together, and my children have at times parented me despite their youth.

In each instance, I have been grateful for a community of support that has been willing to feel what I feel even when doing so has required a tremendous amount of patience. I continue to be thankful for the prayers that rise up. And through it all, I am extraordinarily appreciative to be fortified, to feel encouragement running through me and, I hope, becoming a part of me.

This past summer, something strange happened. Although we never planted a replacement for the second tree, our first tree gave us a small number of cherries again. Apparently a bee brought pollen from another tree in our neighborhood, one we didn't even know about, to our surviving tree, just enough for it to bear a little bit of fruit.

It's striking to me that James concludes by emphasizing encouragement. As I've said multiple weeks as we have made our way through the letter, James is all about the hard truths. And yet, he concludes with this two-fold exhortation for his readers, two-fold because he is encouraging them while also instructing them to encourage each other.

If James is a letter of non-negotiables, of the essentials of faith, then the final standard in this letter is that encouragement itself is non-negotiable. If we choose to enter into a Christian community with one another, encouragement is not a "nice" addition that we throw on top, or an option for when we've got the time or energy. It is a critical component of who we are and of how we are blessed.