

Given the heat of this past week and the holiday that we celebrate tomorrow, I imagine that most of us can totally relate to two of the messages in the reading from James today. Those two messages can be summed up as: Stay cool. And labor on.

Apparently this August is the hottest August on record for Providence. We had 11 days above 90 degrees, and two heat waves – one this past week. How many times on Wednesday or Thursday did you someone tell you in parting or in conversation, “Stay cool!” Heat was foremost on many of our minds.

And tomorrow, many of us have the day off from work in honor of Labor Day, the day we honor the contributions workers have made to the strength and well-being of our country.

Of course, James is talking about a different kind of heat in the scripture passage we have this morning. The heat of anger. But I think we know that too. We know it personally, and we also have seen in our national political arena this year.

Stay cool, James counsels us: Bridle the tongue. And here is the verse that I find especially appealing. “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Be quick to listen is an interesting juxtaposition of terms. We like things to happen quickly nowadays. Be quick to listen! What a hot topic in our society today. Listen and keep a cool head, we are told. There will God's justice be found. The tongue, or what comes out of our mouths, our communication, is connected to our faithfulness to God. This includes whatever we write too – email, social media...

But does this mean that we are to keep silent when we find things abhorrent to us? issues that matter to us? I think of Jesus in the temple with the money changers... James doesn't prescribe passivity. Labor on. We read: be doers of the word, doers who act – for they will be blessed in their doing. Workers. James teaches, hearing the word, means living it. Work to put the word into effect.

Yikes! This is hard, especially in 95-degree weather. I bet all of us were grumpier than usual this week. This reading from James presents something really challenging for each of us – and let's be clear, all of us struggle with this - bridling the tongue, listening, being slow to anger, and living into the Word through a life of action. But here is the cheering part of this reading. This letter reminds that God has gifted us with what we need to help us through the challenge. We

have an anchor in God's wisdom and grace, and if we seek that grace before we blurt something out, before we respond in anger, before we set something in motion that is going to needlessly inflame an interaction, before we set about our work, the outcome will be a different kind of interaction, or in James' words, the outcome will be a first fruit.

There is a striking claim in the opening verse of this passage: "Every generous act of giving...comes from above." All generous acts of giving. This includes acts of compassion, when we advocate for someone or something, our reaching out in support of family, friends and strangers in hard times. All we do that is good comes from God. This means that faithfulness is available to all of us: in our homes, places of work or volunteering, our schools, our churches, and communities and more. Wherever... God is at work for the health of this world God loves so much.

James warns in a rather tough way against certain kinds of behaviors. But James also recommends behaviors that nourish us and others - being quick to listen, slow to speak, and eager to care for those most vulnerable. Acting out our faith by caring for society's marginalized persons ("widows and orphans"). Acting out faith on behalf of the less fortunate, since in the ancient world widows and orphans were the most vulnerable members of society.

All of these things are within our reach. As parents, don't we all want to be slower to anger with our children? As friends, don't we all want to be better listeners? Aren't all of us in a position to offer help and support to those in need? We might hear this reading from James as a commissioning of us as God's co-workers in making this world a more trustworthy, a safer, and healthier place.

I was watching the tennis match on Friday night between Serena and Venus Williams (the US Open). Serena had an absolutely incredible match. Nothing could stop her – she was winning 6-1, and 5-1 the second set, when the commentator quietly observed that Serena was in the "zone". "The zone plus" said the other commentator. She explained to television viewers that the "zone" is a term that tennis players use when everything is going right, when their shots are perfect, and they are just "on" in athletic speak. Serves are going in; the player is supremely focused. That night, Serena was playing at her best, winner after winner.

What might be the “zone’ for a Christian in James’ mind?

A zone where one is quick to listen and slow to speak:

This can happen when we are in the zone and we listen to God for God’s lead instead of a personal agenda. When we are **not** waiting for God to agree with us.

Be slow to become angry.

When we are in the zone we trust in faith, even when we don’t understand. God is in control. We trust in prayer and discernment. We do not insist on understanding God. We become quietly confident in God’s leading. We are open to a coolness that comes from warmth of heart, from God’s Holy Love, God’s Word, in James language, implanted in us.

Live into a life of faith. Be doers of the word.

In that zone, living a life of faith changes us, because through it, God changes us. We may argue with God, I cannot do this, but we are certain that this is exactly what God asks us to do. We may prefer to say no, but, say yes...

May we strive to live in that zone. In the name of Christ, may we stay cool. In the name of Christ, let us labor on.