

## BUMPER STICKER FAITH

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

I average between 20-25 thousand miles a year driving. Roughly calculating the miles, I have traveled since entering ministry, including seminary I have logged well over 500,000 miles since 1996. Fortunately, I like to drive and always enjoy discovering new places. My hours in my car have also become wonderful contemplative times of prayer and have birthed more than one sermon. I am also somewhat of a car fashion geek, observing different makes and models popular where I have lived and worked. When Vern and I travel together, we tend to notice the plethora of vanity plates and if one of us cannot figure out the message of the plate, the other can. For all Rawhide fans, Vern's license plate boasts his nickname, "Ramrod," while mine is reflective of my life work, "Sower." This is a play on words representing the years I spent as a seamstress, which evolved into my years in ministry planting seeds of faith.

Along with vanity plates, the last 15-20 years has been a boon for bumper stickers. First a little history – I was curious about bumper sticker phenomena so of course, googled it. This is what I learned: When the Ford Model A was introduced in 1927, it featured prominent front and rear bumpers. Car owners immediately thought, "I must use this surface to express my opinions and preferences!" And lo, the bumper as pontification space was born.

At first, bumper signs were made of metal or cardboard and attached to the bumper with wire. The bumper sticker as we know it was invented in 1946 by a Kansas City screen printer named Forest P. Gill. After World War II, he found himself with a surplus of adhesive-backed paper and fluorescent paint so he decided to combine them. No one knows for sure what the first bumper sticker said, but the stickers soon became popular as mementos of fairs and other events.

Many of the early, metal bumper plates supported presidential candidates, so it's surprising that the first political bumper stickers weren't printed until the Eisenhower-Stevenson race in 1952. Stickers supporting (or vehemently not supporting) a political candidate or party are still big sellers, along with an infinite variety of other messages, ranging from the classic "My Other Car Is a Porsche/Boat/Horse" to the ever-popular "My Child Is an Honor Student at Local Elementary School."

I am very cautious and selective of any potential artwork I might display on the canvas of my car. In fact, if you look, at present there is nothing except my inspection and county stickers! This does not detract from my enjoying what other people might post. Just last night on my way to Bible study, I passed a car loaded with sayings. One in particular jumped out at me which tickled me to no end, it simply stated, "Eve was Framed." Bumper stickers can carry certain expectations with them, which is probably why I refrain from using them. One time a Grandma wrote the following letter to her family: The other day I went to the local religious book store where I saw a "Honk if you really love Jesus" bumper sticker. I bought it and put it on the back bumper of my car and I'm really glad I did. What an uplifting experience followed. I was stopped at the light of a busy intersection, just lost in thought about the Lord, and didn't notice that the light had changed.

That bumper sticker really worked! I found lots of people who love Jesus. Why, the guy behind me started to honk like crazy. He must really love the Lord because pretty soon he leaned out his window and yelled, "Jesus Christ!" as loud as he could. Why, it was like a football game with him shouting, "Go, Jesus Christ, Go"! Everyone else started honking too, so I leaned out my window and waved and smiled to all those loving people. There must have been a guy from Florida back there because I could hear him yelling something about a sunny beach, and I saw him waving in a funny way with only his middle finger stuck up in the air. I had recently asked my two grandsons what that meant. They kind of squirmed, looked at each other, giggled and told me that it was the Hawaiian good luck sign, so I leaned out the window and gave him the good luck sign back. A couple of the people were so caught up in the joy of the moment that they got out of their cars and were walking towards me. I bet they wanted to pray, but just then I noticed that the light had changed, and I stepped on the gas. It's a good thing I did, because I was the only car to get across the intersection. I looked back at them standing there. I leaned out the window, gave them a big smile, and held up the Hawaiian Good Luck sign as I drove away. Praise the Lord for such wonderful folks! Love y'all, Grandma!

There are some very true stories, however, of drivers making Christian statements with bumper stickers. Fellow United Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton tells this story: Years ago, long before the advent of social media, one of my best friends sought to witness to his faith by placing a bumper sticker on the back of his Chevy that said, "I follow Jesus." I remember being out for a ride in his car when someone pulled in front of us just before a stop light. My friend became angry, and when the light turned green, he sped around the car, pulled in and slowed way down. The driver behind us honked his horn. At the stoplight, both drivers jumped out of their cars ... at which time I heard the guy behind us shout, "Is this what following Jesus looks like?" Among the lessons learned by my friend: Don't put something on your bumper you're not willing to try to live.

What a long beginning to get to the meat of this morning's sermon – What are the marks of a Christian? What and how do we witness to our faith? To define my sermon title, to me, Bumper Sticker Faith is a faith that is superficial. It is on the surface, with little substance underneath. Today's lesson from James is rather grim and heavy on the negatives: <sup>13</sup> *Are any of you wise or sensible? Then show it by living right and by being humble and wise in everything you do.* <sup>14</sup> *But if your heart is full of bitter jealousy and selfishness, don't brag or lie to cover up the truth.* <sup>15</sup> *That kind of wisdom doesn't come from above. It is earthly and selfish and comes from the devil himself.* <sup>16</sup> *Whenever people are jealous or selfish, they cause trouble and do all sorts of cruel things.* Isn't this a nice warm fuzzy message! Fortunately, the writer of James does not leave it there: <sup>17</sup> *But the wisdom that comes from above leads us to be pure, friendly, gentle, sensible, kind, helpful, genuine, and sincere.* <sup>18</sup> *When peacemakers plant seeds of peace, they will harvest justice.*

Where else in scripture have we found similar passages? 1 Corinthians 13 for sure, and I think especially of Paul's letter to the Galatians chapter 5 beginning with verse 19: <sup>19</sup> *People's desires make them give in to immoral ways, filthy thoughts, and shameful deeds.* <sup>20</sup> *They worship idols,*

*practice witchcraft, hate others, and are hard to get along with. People become jealous, angry, and selfish. They not only argue and cause trouble, but they are <sup>21</sup> envious. They get drunk, carry on at wild parties, and do other evil things as well. I told you before, and I am telling you again: No one who does these things will share in the blessings of God's kingdom. Paul then leads into the fruit of the spirit: <sup>22</sup> God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, <sup>23</sup> gentle, and self-controlled. There is no law against behaving in any of these ways.*

Sheesh...sometimes Scripture can be a real Debbie Downer. But...and here comes that other shoe...I don't believe the writers of James, 1Corinthians or Galatians were communicating with the churches without good reason, and truly if we look around our world today, it can be very difficult at times to identify true followers of Jesus Christ.

Did you know that as United Methodist's we have specific teachings on the marks of a Christian? John Wesley speaks of the Marks of the New Birth – sermon 18. (17 pages long) Simply stated, according to Wesley, the marks of a new birth are: three-fold – The First mark of the new birth, and the foundation of all the rest, is faith. A Second scriptural mark of those who are born of God, is hope. A Third scriptural mark of those who are born of God, and the greatest of all, is love. Wesley carried these marks forward to specific behaviors, which he did through the 'societies' he established to foster spiritual maturity among believers. These "small group" classes were quite possibly the first ever Spiritual Direction groups of Methodism, where participants shared their faith, prayed together, shared the Lord's Supper, and held one another accountable for their actions. Wesley had established a list of "rules" to structure these classes: First by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as: The taking of the name of God in vain. The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling. Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity. Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves. Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation; particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers. Softness and needless self-indulgence. It is expected of all who continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation. Secondly, by doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men. And finally, by attending upon all the ordinances of God; the public worship of God. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded. The Supper of the Lord. Family and private prayer. Searching the Scriptures. Fasting or abstinence.

In 2006 Retired Bishop Rueben Job, wrote a small book titled, *Three Simple Rules*. In *Three Simple Rules*, Rueben Job offers an interpretation of John Wesley's General Rules for today's readers. For individual reading or group study, this work calls us to mutual respect, unity and a deeper daily relationship with God. This book offers a humble but challenging look at three commands, "do no harm, do good, stay in love with God."

What are we to make of these sobering words from James this morning? Like John Wesley, and Reuben Job, N.T. Wright makes some helpful observations: *it is both easy and understandable that you and I could make some very harsh criticisms of our world today, much in the manner of*

*James own day. The challenge of us, then is to be able to tell the truth about the way the world is, and about the way wicked people are behaving without turning it into a perpetual grumble, and in particular without becoming someone whose manifestation of 'wisdom' consists of being able to find a cutting word to say about everyone and everything!*

Going further, Wright says, *there is still, after all, a vast amount of beauty, love, generosity and sheer goodness in the world.* We, who follow Jesus should not only be celebrating the beauty, but, contributing to it. You and I are to be the light bearers in a world of darkness! But how? How are we to be those who focus on what is going right in the world and not what is going wrong. Sadly, I believe social media has had too much power in keeping the negativity alive and well. Instead, what if you and I were to focus on each of the words of verse 17 from James: the wisdom that comes from above leads us to be pure, friendly, gentle, sensible, kind, helpful, genuine, and sincere. What if we were to take one of these words and two on Sunday as our theme for the day. What if we were to take the fruit of the spirit: loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled and do the same thing? I believe we would begin a revolution. I believe this kind of witness would make people look at the folks of Marquis and wonder, "what is it that makes them so loving, happy, gentle...? I want what they have!"

Our closing story: There was a Benedictine community to whom nobody came. As the monks grew old, they became more and more disheartened because they couldn't understand why their community was not attractive to other people. Now in the woods outside the monastery there lived an old rabbi. People came from all over to talk to him about the presence of Yahweh in creation. Years went by and finally the abbot himself went into the woods, leaving word with his monks, "I have gone out to speak to the rabbi." (It was of course considered humiliating that a Christian community had to go back to the synagogue to find out what was wrong with them.) When the abbot finally found the rabbi's hut in the woods, the rabbi welcomed him with open arms as if he had known that he was coming. They put their arms around each other and had a good cry. The abbot told the rabbi that his monks were good men but did not passionately share the faith, and the community was dying. He asked the rabbi if he had any insight into the work of Yahweh in their lives. The rabbi replied, "I have the secret and I will tell you once. You may tell the monks and then none of you is ever to repeat it to one another." The abbot declared that if they could have the secret, he was sure his monks would grow. So the rabbi looked at him long and hard and said, "The secret is that among you, in one of you is the Messiah!" The abbot went back to this community and told his monks the secret. And lo! as they began to search for the Messiah in one another they grew, they loved, they became very strong, very prophetic. And the old conference ends: "From that day on, the community saw Him in one another and flourished!"

And I say to each of you here this morning – Go and do likewise! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.