

Restoring the World

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

We have come to the end of our sermon series on Rachel Naomi Remen's, *My Grandfather's Blessings*. Remen begins and ends her book with the Jewish concept that we are all called to restore the world to its original wholeness and goodness, to constantly seek the spark of God that exists in all of us, to encourage it and make it stronger. Doing this, recognizing that our role is to bless ourselves, one another and all of creation through strengthening this spark of God in all of us, is wisdom.

In re-reading Remen's final section this week, I was amazed at how much the very last chapter of her book sounded like it was conveying the same message as our New Testament reading from the book of James. In those verses, James reminds us that we need to stay focused on the wisdom we receive from God, instead of on worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom, he says, encourages bitter envy and selfish ambition. It leads to lying, hypocrisy and betrayal of truth. At its worst, it can lead to all forms of cruelty, like theft and murder.

More importantly, says James, where it really comes from—what he means when he says that it is worldly—is from our own inner conflicting desires. Remen calls this an inner slavery. We enjoy worldly pleasures—alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography, or even

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just excessive and expensive food. Or maybe we crave stuff, like the newest and best phones, televisions, cars, shoes, or clothes. We all have a part of ourselves that pulls us towards those earthly things and, when we can't have them, we will sometimes do harmful things to one another and to the world to get them. That harm might be obvious to you as I speak. You can see times that you or someone you loved were so overcome by their cravings, as James calls them, that they were willing to give up love, security, a job, and all of their money to get them. But James is also warning against the less obvious damage that we can do when we submit to the cravings of the worldly part of our mind—the damage we do to the environment and to the people that we never see on the other end of the supply chain who are enslaved in mines for the precious metals that are needed for the new phones, computers or other electronics. The damage we do to our communities when we spend excessively on ourselves, instead of giving our money to those in need. The damage we do to our communities when we spend excessive time on leisure (I say excessive time, since we do all need rest and breaks), instead of on advocating for just policies or on volunteering where we're needed. We are more than willing and interested in spending this time, money and our spirit on these things because the wisdom of our world teaches us that we need them.

Remen also rightly points out that we can become enslaved to our ways of thinking and to our traditions. We can get caught in cycles of shame where we think of ourselves as worthless or

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useless. We might see ourselves as victims or as entitled, both of which cause harmful behaviors towards ourselves and others. Or we may be trapped in seeing the world as hopeless and full of bad people who aren't worth helping. All of these things, says Remen, cause us to get stuck in behaviors that we aren't willing to change because of our divided mind and because of our fear of the unknown. What will happen, if I change my way of thinking about myself, about our world? What will happen if I change my behaviors? Who will that change cause me to be and what different ways will I need to act?

But, as James and Remen both remind us, the other part of our divided minds and hearts pulls us towards that spark of God shining inside each of us, yearning to shine brighter all of the time. That is the part that wishes to restore the world.

James reminds us that this part of us is gentle, peaceable and merciful. These things, like the fruits of the spirit we talked about last week, will yield good fruits—meaning that if we bless others and ourselves with gentleness, mercy, and kindness, we will see the results in them and in us. That kind of gentleness includes giving *ourselves* some grace when we give in to strongly to the worldly side of our divided mind. We are only human. We make mistakes, and need to grant ourselves and others gentleness. That is the kind of blessing that restores the world.

The author of Proverbs also offers us an image of wisdom that can restore the world. This is a somewhat problematic image, as it

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perpetuates some stereotypes about gender roles, class, and work expectations that can be harmful. However, it also provides us with a very important understanding of wise living. It presents us with the image of a woman who seems to have befriended life. She uses the gifts she has—strength, capability, wise decision making—and works with her hands, doing what the culture of her time allowed women to do. Most importantly to me, she shares the fruit of her labor with the needy and shares her kindness, gentleness, and wisdom with her family and the public. Just as we Christians are called to be servants of one another, she seems to serve the world with all of her being.

What would that look like for us? If we all were to set aside the callings of the worldly sides of our minds and, instead, serve the world with our entire being? In what one or two ways, this week, might you be called to act with greater mercy, gentleness, or compassion? Or what if our struggle against our divided mind, the struggle to bring forth gentleness, kindness, and mercy in ourselves IS our calling?

Remen tells a story that I think illustrates this point well. She explains that the restoration of holiness to the world is a collective task—one that we all participate in all the time through our kindness, gentleness, and mercy. It's as if we are struggling to push back a collective darkness, which is something that we can definitely do, if all of our lights are shining at once. Then she tells the story of a woman who was struggling against alcoholism. She

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felt that it was a darkness she had struggled against for many years. One night, she had the sudden realization that her struggle might be a part of something larger. And she wondered, what if she, alone, was able to redeem this one part of the larger darkness? Think about the light I talked about in Fresh Perspectives. What if the job of that one little light was to restore that one space of darkness around her? What if this was her life-task and her service that she could share with life? Seeing her double-minded struggle in this way strengthened and encouraged her, helping to give her struggle dignity and worth. Remen says that, in the end, the woman wondered if everyone's struggle for freedom against the things that bind them or hold them back has this same larger meaning.

In the end, all of our readings for today have the same core message: Restoring the world is our calling. Jesus gave us the ultimate model for how to engage in that calling, by giving all of himself to others, to teach us, to heal us, to love and support the outcasts and oppressed. His willingness to walk that journey alongside us reminds us that God is always with us on our journey, too, shining like a beacon up out of the depths of our soul. Thanks be to God.