

**Sermon for November 8, 2015 (Proper 27 amended, Year B)  
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 4:8-17 NRSV; Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44

Know what: JAMES series

So what:

Now what:

Title: What is your life?

“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

My friends: we need to be perfectly clear and honest about our lives.

Everything that we build will crumble and decay.

Everything that we create will one day be undone.

Not long after our death, no one living on earth will remember our names.

Does this fact trouble you?

For some, the awareness of the brevity of life leads to despair.

For the Lord’s disciples, this awareness ought to lead to a life of profound humility.

This is clearly what James is after in today’s portion from his Letter.

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:10).

For James, as we have seen over and over again this Autumn, true humility and godliness manifests itself primarily in two sets of actions:

1. In how we use money to promote justice (that’s our main theme next week!),  
and
2. In how we use words to bless those around us.

The problem is that most of us are not quite so magnanimous with our words, are we?

Can you think of a recent example of someone speaking evil against someone else, of judging someone else in order to gain an advantage over them?

Oh, how quickly and easily we take up the position of judge over others, as if WE were the authority in charge!

Erin and I are members of Planet Fitness in town on Marginal Way.

It's the gym with the brand identity of being a "Judgment-Free Zone".

I guess I can understand why this is important.

I confess that I can get a bit judgmental when I'm in the gym.

It's coming up on 30 years from when I first went to a gym to lift, and when I studied and took classes on how to do it properly.

So when I see people exercising with bad form or not using the full range of motion, it's hard for me to not shake my head and judge them and place unflattering labels on them in my mind.

I'll bet you know how this process goes. Knowledge and expertise give us the perception that we have the right to pass judgment on others, because WE know what we're talking about! Isn't that how it works?

This temptation is at work in every arena of human life, and I wish it were true that the Church was a "Judgment-Free Zone" just like Planet Fitness!

But, alas, even here, that old human nature rears it's ugly head.

Perhaps the most astounding story of judgment within the Church is the story of the man known as St. John of the Cross.

St. John of the Cross was born at Fontiveros in Spain in 1542 into a life of poverty.

When he was 21, he became a Carmelite monk. It was not much later before John met the great Teresa of Avila. She inspired him to join in her vision of reforming the Carmelite Order back to its simple, original, spiritual life of prayer and discipline.

Soon, John was one of the leaders of this growing reform movement. But this movement was seen as a threat by many others in the Church, and by many other brothers in his own order. So he was taken prisoner by a group of his brother monks. St. John was held in monastery prison in Toledo for nine months. He was locked in a solitary confinement cell that was 6 feet by 10 feet, with only one window high up in a wall near the ceiling. What is more, this man of God was beaten three times a week, tortured even. All of this was done in the hopes that he might renounce the reforms.

Now, can you imagine the pain that he must have felt? Not only the physical pain, though even that is impossible for me to fathom. But consider further the source of this pain! His own brothers – the Christian family to which he had devoted his entire life – these are the ones who betrayed him and tortured him, for their own goals motivated by greed and fear. Who could he trust? Who were his friends? Who was his family? Who would help him, defend him, liberate him from this pain? And what is more, where was God in all this? Why did God abandon him to this fate?

St. John of the Cross spent nine months in that hell of a prison. Do you know why he is now considered to be a Doctor of the Church? Judged and betrayed by his Christian family, John hit rock bottom, as we say. And in that darkness, that utter blackness, he realized how fragile and fleeting human life truly is. Sitting in that dark cell for nine months, John's soul was set free from all the illusions about life on this earth, and he learned to trust in God alone. Where else could he turn? Where else would he find strength and comfort?

Solitary confinement was a kind of forced humility that took John, not to a place of despair and anger and the desire for revenge, but to a place of solitary trust in God alone. His soul was set free and united with God in an intimate love which very few human beings have ever been privileged to experience.

In case you're wondering, this John of the Cross escaped his cell by patiently unscrewing the lock on his door, sneaking past the guard, and then climbing out of a window by using a rope made of ripped strips of blankets. The only things he brought with him when he escaped were the poems that he had written while in his cell – the most exquisite poetry about the love of God that the world has ever known, born in the pain and darkness of that prison.

What is your life? You are a mist blowing in the wind.

When your earthly life is over, no one will care about your successes at the office or your ability to defeat someone else with your powers of persuasion.

What do the Scriptures tell us? The only things that remain beyond death are the connections which we nurture with our Creator and with one another.

Humility allows us to place our trust in God alone, to remember the brevity of life, and to focus on those things that are of lasting importance.

When James is critical of those in business who make plans for future profit, it is not because they are saying the wrong things. Instead of talking about future gains, he counsels believers to say “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.”

But this is not about saying the correct words.  
It’s about humility.

It’s about recognizing that everything we expect to happen in the future might not come to be. That all of our carefully laid plans may come to nothing. That, truth be told, we are not the masters of our fate. God is in control and this very day might be our last.

What is your life?

It is a chance to learn how to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Judging others, speaking evil of our neighbors, trusting in our plans for the future – none of these things aids in this process of learning.  
It is quite enough to spend all of our lives working through this curriculum.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century deserts of Egypt, there was a famous little man called John the Dwarf. John the Dwarf used to lament how easily the brothers lost perspective on why they were there in the first place. He used to say:  
“We have thrown down the light burden, which is the reforming of our own selves. And we have chosen instead to bear the heavy burden of justifying ourselves and condemning others” (The Wisdom of the Desert by Thomas Merton, p.71).

We have thrown down the light burden of fixing ourselves, and we have chosen to take up the heavy burden of trying to fix others.  
My friends, why carry such a heavy burden of judging your neighbor?

The happy path, the light burden, the joyful life is found when we remain focused on our own work of growing in love. That is quite enough for one short lifetime.

James calls us all to draw near to God in honesty and humility.

So when you walk forward today to receive the sacrament, let that be your time to cleanse your hands, to purify your heart, and to humble yourself.

Each human being comes forward to kneel in humility before the Lord – and to receive the grace that each one needs in this process of transformation.

Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.  
Do it today, and be changed forever. Amen.