

Small Books Big Truths: Jude

October 11, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Jude 1:3-4, 17-25

So, today we are finishing up our current sermon series titled “Small Books Big Truths.” For the last month and a half we have been exploring some of the shortest books in the Bible. Not all of them – there are some minor prophets and a couple of letters that we never quite got to. But I think we’ve had a chance to talk through some of the most fun ones, and in the process we’ve explored some really important truths both about ourselves and the God we serve. We’ve explored well-known, favorite stories like Jonah and Ruth, and far lesser-known books like Obadiah and Philemon. We’ve seen narrative storytelling. History. Lots and lots of history. Prophetic oracles. Letters. We’ve explored life both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and we’ve seen that even though the world has changed a lot over the centuries, our nature as human beings has really not changed all that much.

- We still have a longing for connection and love – as we saw in Ruth.
- We still battle with bullies and have a hard time figuring out what to do with our hard feelings such as anger, like in Obadiah.
- We still find ourselves running away from God when God calls us to do hard things – like loving our enemies – just like Jonah.
- We still ask the question today: Where is God when God is hard to see? Just like in Esther.
- And we are still challenged to approach our lives and our choices with integrity and truth, just like we saw modeled for us last week in Philemon.

Today we are exploring our last book – the book of Jude.

Jude is another book that gets easily and frequently-overlooked. It is not the shortest book in the Bible, but it is one of the shortest, sitting right alongside Philemon at 25 verses.

Like Philemon, Jude is a letter. But unlike Philemon, it lacks some of the classical things that we might expect of most New Testament letters.

First off, it wasn’t written by Paul. If you pull out your Bible and flip through the New Testament – or even better, turn to the Table of Contents, you will see in the New Testament two major sections of letters. The first section starts with the book of Romans, and goes all the way through 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. These are all letters that are either written by the apostle Paul, or attributed to Paul.

But then, we move into another list. Hebrews. James. 1 and 2 Peter. 1, 2, 3 John. And Jude. These are all letters that were written by other people, not Paul. Usually written by an apostle or another servant of Christ, somebody who knew Jesus well within his lifetime. Like Peter. James. John. The disciples who were in Jesus's sort-of "inner circle."

We think that probably the book of Jude was written by Jesus's half-brother named Judas. Not Judas Iscariot (the disciple who betrayed Jesus), but Judas, brother of James. Son of Joseph. Although we are really not entirely certain, this may have also been the same Judas – the disciple of Jesus – who we see referred to in the gospels as "Thaddaeus." We're not sure – because Judas was a *really common* name. But a lot of Biblical scholars believe that this may have been one and the same person.

I have to laugh a little bit – in the United Methodist Church we don't put a whole lot of stock in saints, at least not in the same way that the Catholic church does. But in the Roman Catholic Church, Jude is considered the "patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes." I'm not sure that's what I'd want to be known for after I die. The story goes that early on, a lot of Catholics were afraid to pray to St. Jude because they didn't understand that this Jude, or Judas, was *not* the same person as Judas Iscariot. They were afraid that they were praying to Jesus' betrayer. So the only time anyone would ever pray to Jude would be when they had exhausted all other options and they were desperate – this was kind-of their last "Hail Mary." Hence, the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes.

But that's neither here nor there.

So, the book of Jude. Jude is a letter that is written as an "encyclical." That's basically just a really big, fancy word that means that this letter was not written to one specific church (like most of Paul's letters were) or one specific person (like Philemon, last week, was), but it was instead a letter that was meant to circulate among a large group of churches. *Encyclical*. There's your Scrabble word for the week.

So, rather than addressing a specific situation in a specific congregation, in a specific community, this letter was meant more generally for any church that might happen upon it and read it.

It's also interesting, because this letter kind-of reads almost like an email that was written quickly, and in the heat of the moment when Jude was angry, and he clicked "Send" without letting it sit overnight first. Usually not quite the best move for most of us.

So as we read, what we learn is that Jude was in the process of writing another letter – a much longer and well-thought-through letter – about salvation. But something happened, and we don't know what, and Jude scrapped that other letter and instead wrote this one. Quickly. And in the heat of the moment.

And the sense that we get when we read the book of Jude, is that he is really angry. The book of Jude is basically a letter warning against and denouncing false teachers who have made their way into the church. Who these false teachers are, we don't know. What exactly they are teaching, we don't know. How many churches have become afflicted with these false teachers, we don't know – but we can assume that it was probably most churches. And Jude is furious. He spends most of his letter comparing them to fallen angels, living in chains forever. Sodom and Gomorrah. The devil, fighting against the archangel Michael. Irrational animals who act only on instinct. Cain, who murdered his brother. Fruit trees who refuse to bear any fruit. Wandering stars, lost in the darkness of space forever.

Jude is nothing, if not vivid. He writes of these people “These are grumblers and malcontents; they indulge their own lusts; they are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage.”

And then we get to the part that we read today, and he says, essentially, “These people among you are going to cause major problems. They will be hard to work with. They are only seeking to satisfy their own needs and desires. They will cause divisions among you.

But you – people of God – children of God – beloved of God – you get to change the story. Your story does not *have* to be one of brokenness and division. When it seems like the world is going to pieces and the church is losing its witness in the world, or even worse, when it seems like the church is going to pieces – as Jude saw in the churches that he was in relationship with – there *is* something that you can do about it. Here's what you do, Jude says:

1. *Build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit.* Basically, don't neglect your spiritual life. Life can and does get busy. Things will vie for our attention. Today we are probably living in the busiest and most productive time in history, and that brings with it some gifts, but also some challenges. And the biggest challenge is that so often, our spiritual life is the first thing to go on the back burner when we start to get overwhelmed. I see that within my own life, and I'd be willing to be that that is something that most of us probably struggle with at some time or another. “Build yourself up on your most holy faith.” Continue to study, to learn, to grow, to come to know and love God more fully every single day. “Pray in the Holy Spirit.” Nurture that connection with God. Don't neglect it.
2. *Look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.* Remember that even though we are followers of Christ, we are not perfect. And we are every bit as in need of the grace and mercy of God as the worst of all false teachers that Jude spends so much time railing against. Actively seek God's mercy, Jude is telling us. Take a good, sober, hard look within – and when we

- have failed to be the people who God has called us to be, own that. Confess that. Name that. And then allow God to heal us and move us beyond that.
3. *Have mercy on some who are wavering.* Don't contribute to the divisions, Jude is saying, by setting up an "us vs. them" mentality. But rather, approach all people – even the troublemakers and rabblers around you – with the same mercy that you have received. Be quick to forgive, and practice showing patience and kindness.
 4. *Save others by snatching them out of the fire.* As the body of Christ we are all in this together. So when we see a brother or sister struggling – whether we like that brother or sister or not; whether we agree with that brother or sister or not, we have a responsibility to them, to step in and help when they are drowning. Never mind their theology. Their politics. Their family of origin. Their country. Their approach to life. Never mind if they are cantankerous or crazy or horribly-misguided. If you see them in the fire, pull them out. When they are in over their head, step in and help. When they are in trouble, be there.
 5. *And have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.* I think this is sort-of Jude's version of Jesus's reminder to "shake off the dust." Never stop loving and praying for those around you – even those who make it really hard – even those we have a hard time loving and praying for. Same message that we got back in the book of Jonah. But don't get drawn in to their drama. Don't be led astray by their teaching. You can love them and have mercy on them without *becoming* them. And if we see ourselves beginning to spiral down the tunnel of division and hatefulness and fearmongering, then that's probably a pretty good warning sign that we have lost our focus on Christ and have begun serving someone or something else. "Be afraid of that," Jude says. "That should be cause for alarm."

And then Jude closes with a blessing: "Now to the one who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing," – to the God who alone is holy, the God who pours himself into our hearts and our lives, transforming our brokenness into wholeness, to the God who alone can give us the strength and the wisdom to live lives of faith, mercy, hope, and love, even in the face of a world that altogether too often reflects anything but faith, mercy, hope, and love, to this God – the God of transformation and of healing "be glory, majesty, power, and authority, now and forever."

Friends, I love this little book of Jude. It may not be the easiest or the most fun read, but it so beautifully sums up every place we've been over the last month and a half. If we've learned anything from our readings of these little, short books it is that we are a people in desperate need of the grace of a powerful God. If left to our own devices, we can so easily fall into the places where the "false teachers" of Jude's letter find themselves – in places of such deep brokenness, deep darkness, lost and flailing around, and wondering where God has gone. Cutting ourselves off from others in our grief. Seeking vengeance in our anger. Running away from God because of our hatred. Growing bitter in our

loneliness. Protecting ourselves through lies and deceit when we find ourselves in life's tough spots.

And Jude's message to us is simple, even though it's not easy. "God is calling you to something greater," Jude tells the church. The church of his day, as well as the church of ours. "So when it seems like the world has gone haywire, and people are turned upside-down and what is true and noble and good seems nebulous and fuzzy, and it is hard to know what to believe or what to do anymore; when it is easier to see the darkness than it is to see the light; and when the voice of God seems quiet amid the shouting of the masses, then it's time to go back to the basics. So Jude starts us again, at the very beginning, with these simple and profound reminders.

1. Your relationship with God is of utmost importance. Don't neglect it.
2. You are beloved, but not perfect. When you mess up, admit it and move on. God is a God of forgiveness.
3. When others mess up, treat them with grace.
4. When others are hurting, step in and lend a hand.
5. And when life in the messiness grows toxic for you, step away and pray from afar. Don't become part of the problem – trust that when we have reached our limit, God will bring order out of the chaos.

[Wrap it up!]