

Sermon

“Every Generous Act of Giving”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 29, 2021

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Prayer of Illumination —

Lord, we hear your warning about people who honor you with our lips but whose hearts are far away from you. We are informed by the admonition of James, “ But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

So we gather on this Lord’s Day in grateful anticipation of your challenging call to obedience which finds expression of our many acts of kindness to our neighbors. May our discipleship match your fidelity. May our generosity mirror your prodigal grace.

In the name of our Creator to whom all creatures turn to receive their food in due season — and who opens the wealth of creation in generous grace, satisfying the desires of every living thing. (Psalm 145:15-17). Amen.

Mark 7:1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, a thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; a and there are also many other

traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)^b 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Mark 7:9 Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

Mark 7:14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”^a

Mark 7:17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

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James 1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no

variation or shadow due to change.^a 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Hearing and Doing the Word

James 1:19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

James 1:26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- I. Most Surprising & Exciting aspect of our faith . . .**
 - A. Our lives are not arbitrary or accidental**
 - B. (Rather) they are meant to be part of what God is doing to redeem all of creation . . .**
 - C. God has boldly invited us into participation with God to make the world as it was meant to be.**
 - 1. Jesus even taught us to remember that in the prayer - that “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*”**

- D. Redemption (heaven) is *now & here*.**
 - 1. Sadly, modern (especially Protestant Christianity) has reduced the concept of heaven to an “evacuation plan for the future.”**
 - 2. But for Jesus, and for Paul, and for James — redemption is happening *now*. We live in heaven or hell *now*. We choose whom we will serve *today*.**
- E. One of the most refreshing things I’ve ever learned from my monastic friends is to wake every morning:**
 - 1. Giving thanks that I am alive.**
 - 2. Asking God what God has been doing while I slept and asking how I can be a part of that as I begin my day.**

- II. If we are going to work with God it is natural to ask:**
 - A. What is it that God wants? To what end is God aiming?**
 - B. It seems very clear that from the start one of the big things God desires is that we establish and maintain a *workable human community*.**
 - 1. From Genesis to Exodus, to Jesus, to Paul - this goal is repeated over and over.**
 - C. God clearly wants that there is a workable human community. When you look at the 10 commandments, and all of the other “instructions” found in the Torah it become clear that much (perhaps all) of the Torah is designed to create a workable human society.**

1. ***Neighborliness* lies at the heart of God’s intentions for the human community.**
2. **Against our *many* inclinations to separate ourselves and feel superior, God keeps legislating a more level playing field.**
 - a. **The grace of God becomes the great equalizer.**

III. James is a keen observer of Human Nature

- A. **He sees how actions and word both big and small are influencing the human community.**
- B. **His letter is a desperate appeal that we let our words and our actions line up with the words and actions of the Father of Lights.**
- C. **James makes the urgent appeal that we take our cue not from the fallen world — but from:**
 1. **“...the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”**
 2. **He tells us we have received from God every generous gift & that we “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”**

IV. James exposes the obvious hypocrisy of coming to worship and praying for a world full of poor, and needful people — of seeking God’s help to end injustice,

and of lifting up the broken and broken-hearted, *but then nor doing anything to change these things.*

- A. It is not enough to express concern with our mouths — we are called *to do* our best to work with God to change these realities.**
- B. Even Luther (who dismissed the Epistle of James as “an epistle of straw”) agrees with this sentiment:**
 - 1. Luther understood the necessity of expressing the gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in love.**
 - 2. "A Christian is a free lord, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all."**

V. Mature Faith will always be expressed in a discipleship which is rich in significant acts of generosity and compassion.

- A. Perhaps you know that Calvin is credited with establishing the first modern expression of a welfare system:**

Historian Jeannine Olson noted Calvin's contribution to modern society through his creation of welfare institutions. The city of Geneva during the Reformation period had many poor, widows, and orphans. Calvin himself came to Geneva as a French religious refugee. In his Ecclesiastical Ordinances (1541), Calvin established the General Hospital and designated the offices of deacon and deaconess to supervise citizens' works of mercy as the "doers of the pure religion" in care of the poor. — from FOW.

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- B. James knows this too:**
 - 1. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans**

and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- C. We do two things:**
 - 1. Care for our neighbors who are most vulnerable . . .**
 - 2. We care for our *own* vulnerabilities.**
- D. Do you see what James has done?**
 - 1. The integrity of faith embraces neighbor and self: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).**
 - 2. In this way we are called to be mindful of the world's vulnerable — but *also of our own vulnerability* to accept the habits and values of a fallen world as our own.**

VI. We learn to be generous as we experience the generosity of others. I wonder where you have known the generosity of others?

- A. Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**
 - 1. Sustained my academic scholarship to CTS.**
- B. Lucy Rose**
 - 1. Who read *every* terrible sermon I wrote . . .**
- C. My mother**
 - 1. Who signed her paychecks and mailed them to me.**
- D. I see acts of generosity here at CPC already and I want to celebrate a few of those with you:**
 - 1. Our long and dedicated conversations about how we can:**
 - † Dismantling Structural Racism**

- † **Eradicating Systemic Poverty**
- 2. **The generous response to our CYHMN campaign.**
 - † **Raising \$38,000 in the midst of the economic uncertainty brought by worldwide pandemic is no small feat.**

We are over 75% of the way to our goal (\$38,000 of \$50,000). Please help us finish this campaign!
We have received generous gifts from 80 donors to date, with an average gift of over \$400 each.

- 3. **The tireless contributions of time and talent.**
- E. **Finally, and most importantly — we learn to be generous because we have experienced the generosity of God.**

Psalm

- VII. **The part given to us is manageable. *God* will redeem all things. We need not be overwhelmed with the enormity of the task before us.**
 - A. **Our part is to cooperate with God's *big* work.**
 - 1. **Be kind**
 - 2. **Practice generosity ungrudgingly**
 - B. **If we will do this — God will be glorified and we will grow in grace.**

Even
After
All this time

the Sun never says to the earth,

“You owe
Me.”

Look
What happens
With a love like that,
It lights the
Whole
Sky.

— *Hafiz* 14th Century Persian Poet