

JAMES 1: “DOERS OF THE WORD”

(06/27/10)

Scripture Lesson: James 1:1-27

“But be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

For our Sunday morning reflections the next six weeks we will be looking at the New Testament Book of James. We will read one chapter of this pastoral letter every week. I will provide some general information about the letter and its author, taken largely from *The Interpreter’s Bible* and *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, the two resources that I turn to most often and use with the most confidence. Then I will lift up two or three passages or themes that teach us something about what it means to be a Christian.

The Letter of James is a strange letter, at least compared to the other letters in the New Testament. While the opening words resemble other New Testament letters, this resemblance does not extend beyond the first verse, and even the first verse has its own unique features. It is unique in its vague description of the readers. Instead of naming them precisely, as, for example, Paul does when he addresses a letter to “the church of God that is in Corinth,” we have the puzzling phrase “the twelve tribes in the dispersion.”

Equally vague is the identity of the writer. He gives his name simply as “James,” which in its original form “Jacob” was a common name among Jews and early Jewish Christians. This leaves his modern readers to decide which “James” among the many early Christians of that name is the writer. He describes himself as a “servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” This identifies him as a Christian, perhaps a Christian leader, but it does not tell us much more than this. He also refers to himself as one of those “who teach,” something already obvious from the fact that he wrote the letter.

The relationship between the writer and his intended readers is also not clear. The tone of authority that is present in the letter is purely impersonal. He does not say a single word about any personal experiences he has had with or among them, or any news that he has heard about them, as Paul does in his letters. He sends no greetings from himself or anyone else to any of his readers, as Paul often does. The letter does not even close with the customary farewell message; in fact, it has no formal ending at all. It simply stops abruptly and without warning.

Finally, there is no hint regarding the timing or the occasion of the letter. Verses 1:2-4 suggest a time of persecution, but the language of these verses is too general to draw any conclusions, and the theme of persecution is dropped almost immediately. In fact, the teaching contained in this letter is so free from application to any specific time or place that it is as fresh and useful today as when it was first written.

Now let's take a look at the first chapter.

James tells us that when we face trials of any kind, we should consider them "nothing but joy." This seems like a bit of a stretch. I know from my own personal experience that our trials and tribulations can be an important part of our spiritual journey, partially because they throw a spot light on the inadequacy of our personal resources and lead us into a deeper relationship with God, but I have never been able to regard my trials as "nothing but joy." When I am counseling someone who is going through a difficult period in his/her life I have never said, "My pastoral advice to you is to think of the tragedy you have just experienced as nothing but joy." I suspect that would be the end of the conversation.

However, James does have a point. He tells us that the testing of our faith can produce endurance. It is interesting how he ties our personal trials to a testing of our faith. When we think about it, isn't this often the case, at least for the religious person? The trial, whatever it is, causes us to reflect on life, on the meaning of life, on the role of pain or tragedy or loss in life, and on our expectations of life and of God. The trial may test our faith, not only in the sense of challenging our faith but in the sense of testing our faith as one might test the purity of a metal by submitting it to fire.

James tells us that our trials, if we respond to them properly, should lead us to maturity and to completeness. I totally agree with him in this. Our trials, our tribulations, even our tragedies should lead us to a more mature, to a less childish view of life. It should lead us to a more mature, to a less childish view of ourselves. It should lead us to a more mature understanding of God and hopefully to a deeper faith in God.

Let me give you one of my favorite examples of this dynamic. Several years ago, Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of the Democratic senator John Edwards, was asked by an interviewer to explain the role of her faith in helping her cope with her breast cancer and the tragic loss of their teenage son in an automobile accident. Elizabeth Edwards replied

that before the tragedy of their son's death and the ongoing trial of her breast cancer, she had what she now regards as a childish and immature religious faith, a childish and immature understanding of God. She had certain unexamined and untested expectations of God and her relationship with God.

Elizabeth Edwards said that throughout her life she had apparently assumed that if she were a good person and a good Christian, if she tithed to the church and was generous in her support of charities, if she were a good daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend, that God would take care of and protect her and her loved ones.

Then her son died in a tragic automobile accident. This didn't fit the picture she had of God and the kind of care that, at least according to many of our favorite hymns, God extends to us. This is precisely the moment when many people become disillusioned, when they abandon or lose their illusion. They become angry with God. They decide that they can never forgive God for either willing what happened or allowing what happened to happen. This is the point where they give up their faith, the moment when they turn away from God. Many of these people never step foot inside a church again.

Elizabeth Edwards's response was different. With a sparkle in her eye she told the interviewer, "This was the moment when I realized that God doesn't protect people, even good people."

I think this is what James might have had in mind when he tells us that our trials can lead us to a more mature and complete faith. Of course, it doesn't always happen that way. I don't know what percentage of people cling to their childish beliefs about God, about life, and about their relationship with God. They throw away not only the opportunity to grow and mature in their faith, they throw away their relationship with God. I suspect that this is what happens with a large percentage of people.

The second section of this letter that I would like to lift up this morning is the statement,

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.

This verse teaches us that the act of giving, at least when it is done in an unselfish matter and “with a cheerful heart,” is a divine or sacred act. The act of giving shapes the soul of the giver. In this sense, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

This verse reminds us that the spirit in which the gift is given is important. The gift needs to be given freely, just as God gives to us freely. We should also feel good about the gift we give. Just as an example, we should reflect on the amount we pledge to our church or the amount we put in the offering plate this morning from that perspective. If we pledge or put in the minimum, if we feel embarrassed about how little we give in relation to how much we have, it is probably an indication that the gift is not given in a true spirit of generosity and therefore will not shape our soul in a Christ-like way.

Finally, we have the interesting section in chapter 1 that has to do with the distinction between hearing and doing the word. This section begins with the following:

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 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.

I love that last line: “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your soul.” It reminds me of Christmas and how if we, like Mary, welcome with meekness the implanted word, the Logos, if we make room for it in the crowded inn of our life, it has the power to save our soul.

In this last section of the first chapter James tells us that our religion should make a difference in our life. It Mahatma Gandhi once said that the teachings of Jesus are magnificent and Christianity is a wonderful religion. After a pause, he said that it should be apparent from looking at a person, from the way he/she was living his/her life, whether that person was a Christian. Unfortunately, when Gandhi looked at most people who declare themselves to be Christian, he couldn't tell from the quality of their life that the teachings of their magnificent religion made the slightest bit of difference.

If this is true, and I suspect it is for many Christians, this is sad. It would imply that the person's religion is compartmentalized, perhaps confined to an hour a week in a designated sacred space, but it does not permeate the person's life and the person's week.

Just a few weeks ago I heard someone who was a member of a Christian church say that he thought that we should be circumspect about giving to other people. Whether we are giving time or money, he said we should not give if it takes something away from us and from our family, if it depletes our personal resources. I wondered whether the man had ever read the story of the widow's mite. While they were in Jerusalem Jesus called his disciples' attention to a poor widow who put two coins in the temple treasury. It was not much, but it was everything she had. Because she withheld nothing she was held up as an example of faith.

I suspect that the man, whom I hardly knew, had not read the story or the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man. I have no idea what he was doing when his pastor preached on these passages of scripture. I also suspect that when he prays, he doesn't ask Jesus to help free him from his attachment to material possessions. If Jesus' many teachings about giving, about being a servant, about going the second mile don't apply to him or to his life, then what does it mean to him to be a Christian? Could it really be that he believes that Christianity is nothing more than a belief system that one holds or purports to hold and that it is not meant to shape the quality of one's life?

James challenges us. James asks us how we can say we are Christians when we withhold from those in need. He asks us how we can claim to be Christians when we respond with anger in our relationships with others. He tells us that being a Christian involves more than hearing the word or even believing in the word. It has to do with living the word. He challenges us to "be doers of the word and not hearers only."

I don't know how we could declare ourselves to be Christian and also be racist. Did we simply listen to the Parable of the Good Samaritan and not feel that it applies to us? I don't see how we can declare ourselves to be Christian and not be compassionate as Jesus was when he encountered people in need. I don't see how we can declare ourselves to be Christian and believe that the world centers around us, around our needs. No matter how often we go to church and how often we hear the words of scripture, if we do not take them to heart and let them become the yeast that will fill our lives, we will, as James said, be hearers of the word and not doers.

James closes this letter with a powerful statement. He tells us to take an honest look at how we relate to others, perhaps especially to the members of our family. He says,

If any think they are religions, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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 word.

We may not have occasion to reach out to any orphans or widows in the week to come, although we may, and that certainly would be a good, a Christian thing to do. But there will be many opportunities in the week to come, perhaps even today, when we could do or say something sensitive, caring, compassionate, helpful, and perhaps even healing to someone, or when we could refrain from doing or saying something hurtful. James would tell us that when we do this, we are empowering our religion, our religious beliefs to shape our life and then, through our acts of kindness, to shape the world. He tells us that this is what it means to be a Christian.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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