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Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

James 1:17-27

September 1, 2024

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

***19You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, 20for human anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 21Therefore 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.***

***22But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25But 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.***

***26If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27Religion 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.***

You will be happy to know, perhaps, that except for communion later, there will be no mention of bread today. Unlike the mysterious, metaphorical and spiritual style of the Gospel of John we will now spend the month of September with the letter of James. James is written in a style much like some of the Old Testament, like Proverbs, that outline some insights and instructions on how to walk a life of faith. There are lots of practical down to earth explanations of how to be a follower of Christ in this letter. Unlike other Biblical letters, James is not written to a particular city that is experiencing particular struggles. This letter, written just 50 years or so after the death of Jesus, was written to a general audience of Jewish-Christians living in the diaspora of the time. There was not a formalized Christian theology at the time, so James wrote to try to help Jesus’ followers remain hopeful despite two things: first, Jesus had not returned as he promised, and second, the social fabric of the area was wearing thin. History tells us that the war with Rome was just 15 years away.

Just five short chapters, a mere few pages near the end of the New Testament, this letter is often overlooked. Even Martin Luther, part of our Protestant Reformed ancestry did not want to include this letter of James and some others in his version of the Biblical, primarily because it did not contain much about the gospel.

The letter covers the same topics as all of Jesus’ teachings even though it only mentions Jesus as Christ by name twice. Like many first chapters the first chapter of the letter of James contains an intro to topics that will be covered in later chapters. All of the topics are answers to the question, “What does it mean to live as a Christian?” In other words, for our purposes, if Jesus is the bread of my life, (oops, I mentioned bread) why does that matter? How does that affect me? How will our focus last month lead to our focus this month? This letter of James tells us to “ask not what God can do for you, but ask what you can do for God.” Filled with both encouragement and admonitions, the letter of James holds several areas of focus, some of which are mentioned in the text today from the first chapter and will be expanded upon throughout the letter.

First, “*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 line is the conclusion of a statement that began just before it – When it comes to our behavior, anything that tempts us is not from God. When we give in to temptation, we are in danger of beginning a course that will lead to sin, that will lead to death. That is not from God, that is from our desires. On the other hand, every generous act of giving and every perfect gift, is from God. What we will discover in the letter of James, is that James is not concerned with our oaths or promises or confessions or beliefs except as they affect our behaviors. Our relationships with others matters. We ought to behave as if we have been brought together by God – not just any god, but God who sent his son to us that we might be newly born into this new creation. The God who is so full of light that there is not even any shadow. (“Great is thy Faithfulness” words: “Great is thy faithfulness, O God Creator, there is no shadow of turning with thee.”) By being brought together by the Word – remember the gospel of John begins with the Word becoming flesh – so that we as community, wherever we are, are the first fruits of God’s new creation. In that way, James is talking not just to the Jewish-Christians who had scattered to other places, but to you and I who are not only in another place but are in another time. And here James goes on to describe how those in this new creation, this new community should behave.

Next, in preparation for a later portion of the letter where James cautions us to watch our tongues, James tells us here to take care which words are in our heads in the first place. This is so important to us. There is a certain type of person in the bay area who might be familiar to us. This person is perhaps college educated, perhaps progressive, perhaps considers themselves sophisticated who sees the bay area as a kind of a bubble compared to other places. Sometimes this consideration of the bay area as a bubble implies that it is a much better, smarter, cleverer, more knowledgeable bubble than other places. We see our own opinions as correct and guided by the best and latest and greatest information.

There is nothing wrong with loving where one lives, and loving it because of some pretty great things. But the danger comes when we forget what biases we have that lead us to assume that the way we think is best. I took a class about anti-black racism in our denomination and the first thing the instructor said at the start of every class was, “If you’re not black or brown, don’t speak first.” As a white person my voice gets heard way more often than others. If we are to learn from others we must listen first. Truly listen. Not just perfunctorily wait. That comes up on committees all the time. I’m sure you’ve seen it too. Anyone who works regularly with other cultures knows this all too well. And it’s not just voices that get shut down. When someone is not heard, their needs are not met and there can be great suffering. It’s important to know that our biases are not necessarily things we consciously thing about and consider to be true. Our biases are often pieces of knowledge that we have picked up throughout our lives, that lead us to believe that certain things are true. James invites us to think differently.

*19You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, 20for human anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 21Therefore 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 does not ask us not to get angry. James asks us to go there slowly. We will get angry, and many times, should get angry. But hot-headed rage does not lead to God’s justice. Listening first means we might learn something, we might realize something, we might come up with better less defensive questions to engage someone further. By being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, we might hear that “implanted word” that comes to us. That word might be kinder, less self-serving, more productive than the word that might have come from us if we had not regulated our emotions. Or maybe, we should consider if what we have to say needs to be said at all. Some just speak to hear themselves speak. We have to ask ourselves if how we communicate – words, visuals, actions – reflects the temperament of someone who is faithful to God.

Next comes an introduction to the topic that led Martin Luther to question the inclusion of this letter in the Bible. “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.” It may appear that James’ emphasis on doing is in opposition to Paul’s emphasis on the importance of our faith over our works. But really, they were both emphasizing the importance of faith. James wants us to hear the word and let that inform our actions, and then we should follow through with those actions. Paul emphasizes our faith also, but his audience required him to differentiate between those who were doing works of the law, instead of actually practicing their faith. For Paul, you can’t just do things according to the law and call yourself religious. You had to have faith. For James, our actions stem from our faith. Faith comes first. Actions that follow faith will be blessed. We will hear about this more next week, when we read from Chapter 2. James says,

*22But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25But 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.*

And finally, James puts these three ideas together and sums up what a faithful Christian is like. Control your tongue, be honest in your heart and these things will bring about a religion that is pure and undefiled before God. And here was this week’s rabbit hole. I wondered how James was using the word religion. Since Christianity wasn’t a religion yet, I wondered if “religion” meant faith, or if “religious” referred to those in the synagogue who were pious but not believing. But if you google “What did James mean by religion?” you get information about the philosopher William James who wrote about religion a great deal. Also information about his father Henry James, Sr. who was an American theologian. Both were really interesting! I’m happy to say that that rabbit hole did not steal too much of my time. In the letter of James, James refers to religion to mean an outward display of an inward belief. Here we read the summation of James’ focus – to take care which words we use, to take care how we listen, to take care to not take actions based on our temptations – deceiving our hearts.

*26If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27Religion 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.*

How I would love to be unstained by the world! I wonder how much time and energy each of us spends on removing those stains? How much time do we spend removing the stain of a world that tells us what beauty is? How much time do we spend removing the stain of a world that tells us what hard working is, what productivity is, what is considered valuable? Then there’s the stain of a world that tells us what success is? Do you have enough money, 2.4 kids, a home, expendable income, proper clothing, spend your free time the right way, are you beautiful enough according to that same world’s definition – to be considered successful?

This month we will consider what James has to say about all of this, and more. We only need to remember that we belong to God, we are God’s creation, and we can welcome God’s implanted word.

Amen.

Aymer, Margaret, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-james-117-27-6>