

August 31, 2003  
Season after Pentecost  
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## True Religion

James 1:17-27      *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.*

*Those who know don't talk; those who talk don't know. [Tao te Ching, 6<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE]*

Before we explore our reading from the Letter of James, I want to set it up a little bit.

The Letter of James is a curiosity. We don't know for certain who wrote it, though many scholars think it was James, the brother of Jesus, a leader in the Jerusalem church, executed by Rome in 62 C.E. It is not so much a "letter" as a collection of moral and ethical teachings; it reads a lot like the Book of Proverbs. James had a great appreciation for the Jewish tradition of ethical wisdom--our concern should be less with theological beliefs and doctrines than with the kind of life God wants us to live. The proof of religion is in the pudding of our daily lives. That's how James sees it.

The letter is odd because it hardly mentions Jesus at all! The writer was in a dangerous situation, bearing witness to Christian faith while surrounded by religious and political hostility. The writer wasn't particularly impressed with martyrdom, but with the challenge of surviving as an effective and true witness to the faith of Jesus Christ in a hostile environment. Martyrdom may be fine as far as it goes. But what good is a dead witness to Christ?

Yet there is something else here. James had a profound grasp of what Jesus was about and who we are to be as his followers. It has more to do with how we live than with talking about Jesus. Didn't Jesus himself say, "Why do you call me 'lord, lord,' but do not do what I ask?" (Luke 6:46) Wasn't Jesus uneasy when attention was focused more on him than on God? (Mark 10:18) Jesus pointed away from himself to God and called people to live with God at the center of their lives. Here is a caution when we are tempted to a lot of Jesus-talk and are not living the Jesus-life. There is enough of that going on in the church these days. Jesus, who called us to love our enemies and away from violence, is made into a cheerleader for nationalistic military ventures. Jesus, who called the poor blessed, told them God's kingdom belonged to them, and challenged his followers to give up materialism, is made into a champion of consumerism, the free market economy, and affluence. James understood what happens when we talk a lot about Jesus and stop living as his disciples.

So that's the kind of thing we're into with the Letter of James. But let's look at the reading for this morning and see how James calls us from talk to action, from theory to practice.

*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. In fulfillment of God's own purpose God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures.*

James is not above writing a beautiful little piece of theology! What a wonderful image of God as the "Father of lights," from whom flows all that is good and generous, all that gives life! It isn't clear whether James means only God's generous acts of giving and perfect gifts or ours, or both. Maybe that's it: God has made us so that God's own nature—generous giving—is our nature, too. This is what it means to be made in God's image! And when James says that God has given us birth by the "word of truth," that is, by the embodiment of that word in Jesus Christ, when James says that God is bringing to fruitfulness this original nature that is ours, this should change the whole way we look at ourselves. Yes, we are pretty messed up and confused people who have a hard time living out our truest nature as God's beloved daughters and sons. But when we see who we really and truly are, down deep, we are filled with hope! We must replace the notion of "original sin" with that of "original goodness," or what Matthew Fox calls "original blessing." What Augustine developed as a doctrine of "original sin" is not found in the Jewish mind and reading of scripture. And that's where the writer of James is coming from. He's a thoroughly Jewish Christian and has a complete grasp of Hebrew Scriptures and of who Jesus was in that tradition. Jesus shows us and gives us our true nature. We are made for generosity and goodness. We

are so intimately and deeply connected to God that we can be, as Francis said, instruments of God's peace, love, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and justice.

*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.*

Now James gets down to business! From theology to practical theology—how we live in light of who God is and who we are. Listening is more important than speaking. Silence is the doorway to understanding and true living. Anger accomplishes nothing of God's purposes, even what we call "righteous indignation."

The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama has an essay entitled "Christianity Suffers from 'Teacher Complex'". He grew up in a culture that suffered the arrogance of Western-imported Christianity, which felt it had nothing to learn from others and their spirituality, their religion. This, says Koyama, is one of the chief reasons for resistance to Christianity—it talks too much and does not know how to listen. If we are unable to listen to other people then it is likely we are not listening to God either. Before speaking, before anger arises, says James, be quick to listen.

For James, anger is an accommodation to the world. Among those to whom James wrote were zealots who used their faith in Jesus as a launching pad for attacks on the world around them. These persons spoke with "righteous indignation" about injustices and oppressions. James did not deny the realities of injustice or oppression. But he saw more deeply. Angry diatribes express nothing of the Gospel. They are only words, and words don't accomplish anything. There is much to be angry about, much injustice, cruelty, lack of compassion. This needs to be recognized and confronted. But James is saying that merely venting our anger doesn't serve God's purposes. Instead, we would do better to listen closely and deeply to God, to Christ, to the Gospel, and then live our lives accordingly. Instead of getting lost in anger, we do better to live our own lives in ways that counter injustice with justice, indifference with compassion, evil with goodness. We do better to listen to how God is calling each of us to some mission that engages the suffering of the world with real healing.

James tells us to pay attention to the "implanted word that has the power to save our souls." He's not telling us to turn inward and be preoccupied with personal salvation. The implanted word is a reference to what happened to us in our baptism, when we literally entered into Christ, when new life was planted in us like the good seed in Jesus' parable. It is important that we attend to the growth in us of this life so that we become new people and a new community. This is not withdrawing from the needs of the world. It is becoming the sorts of people and communities that can really touch those needs and offer something besides fretful commiseration or fruitless anger.

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

Here James brings it all together. Listening and doing go together. The very word "obedience" has its root in the French word "to listen." True obedience is listening and doing, not just listening and not just doing. It is living our lives out of our understanding of what is truly important and real, out of our intimate relationship with the living God who speaks to our hearts and minds.

James uses the image of someone looking in the mirror and then forgetting what she or he looks like. To come to worship and listen to scripture and a sermon, and then to go away with no sense of putting into practice what we hear is to forget who we are. The Church of the Covenant came to birth out of this simple notion: Christian life is to be LIVED, not just talked about. That's nothing new or original. But it has seemed to be the hardest thing in the world for Christians through the centuries to seriously strive, or persevere as James says, to live as different people in the world. That's all James is saying. What good is it for us to hear the message that we are God's beloved children, blessed and created to be generous and giving, if we don't make a stab at really living that way?

That's all that our spiritual disciplines are about. They are daily reminders of how we can keep our focus on living out the Good News of God's love in Christ every day, within the unique gifts and situations and callings of our lives. The disciplines are there so that we don't forget what we look like!

*If any think they are religious, 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 world.*

True religion means bridling our tongues, says James. James will write a bit later about the damage that our speaking can do, the hurt we can inflict by our thoughtless speaking. But here let us say this in general: Christian faith is about the living Word of God embodied in Jesus and given to us. It is a religion of the Word, but not of wordiness. Ours has become such a verbal world and a verbal religion that we can hardly listen anymore, we can hardly tolerate the silence that is necessary to really hear the truth of God and of Christ. Our actions then arise only out of our compulsions and drivenness, rather than as the outflowing of God's generous giving through us.

Years ago I read an interview with Henri Matisse, the famous artist. When asked what he thought about artists who talked about their work, Matisse simply made a scissors-like motion towards his mouth: "They should have their tongues cut out!" Maybe that's what James is saying. It is most important, most urgent for others and ourselves that we listen, that we learn to be silent, to be empty enough to hold God's own living Word. That Word "speaks" more through lives than words. That Word wants to become incarnate in our lives, just as it was incarnate in Jesus.

What is pure, true religion? James says it boils down to this: caring for orphans and widows in their distress, and keeping ourselves unstained by the world. "Widows and orphans" is a biblical way of saying all who are in need, all who are excluded and left out, all who are maligned by society and religion. It is the same thing Jesus said in his parable of the final judgment. How will our lives be measure in terms of meaning and purpose and value? Not by what we believed. Not by whether we appeared to the world to be "religious" people. But by whether we ministered to the imprisoned, the sick, the poor, the hungry, in short, whether our lives were in touch with those in need.

As to keeping ourselves unstained by the world, James doesn't mean withdrawing into some sanctimonious piety. He means not allowing the greed, hate, violence, fears, and self-centeredness of the world invade our own hearts and minds and lives. He means keeping ourselves centered in Christ whom we follow.

Inner listening and prayer. Letting the Good News of our true nature in Christ grow up in us. Doing what we feel God calls us to do through our unique gifts for the giving of life. This, says James, is true religion and true life.