

The End of 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.*

The theologian Paul Tillich somewhere wrote that Jesus is the end of religion. To me that means in Jesus we learn that religion, rightly practiced, leads us toward living the way we were created to live. Getting caught in religion for its own sake leads to unhealthiness. We become absorbed in institutionalism. We become promoters and defenders of our religion, condemning those who believe differently. We become extremists, carrying out violence against those we see as enemies of "our faith." Religion is not an end in itself, but points us to our true humanity.

The writer of the Letter of James would agree, I think. The letter was written toward the end of the first century to Christian communities suffering persecution in a violent world. The writer is saying: I know the situation is very bad, but do not compromise who you are. Be faithful to the message of the Gospel that you have received. For us today, the message might be: There is much going on around you that is a complete mess, a self-centered, power-seeking culture that is destroying people, the creation, and itself. Stay grounded in who God made you to be. You may not be able to change the whole situation, but by continuing to do what you know is good and true, you contribute to what God is doing to bring healing, peace, and wholeness. Keep living according to what you have heard and learned in Jesus. That is the "implanted word" James speaks of.

The reading begins with a wonderful image of God. Every act of generosity, every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights. God is pictured as the consistent goodness and benevolence that shines unwaveringly at the heart of the universe. Dede Buhler has a painting in the Lodge that I think reflects just what James is speaking of. It is titled "Ever Present Love." It is this God who has re-awakened us through the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. James is saying to the struggling Christian communities that, though the situation around them is full of suffering and feels hopeless, the essential nature of life is God's unchanging, non-discriminating goodness.

James does not try to explain evil or suffering. His approach is simple and direct: God is the source of goodness and generous giving. We are made in God's image so that we can live in generous, life-giving ways. If we are doing that, then we are the "first fruits" of God's new creation. We are living in harmony with the deepest nature and purposes of life. James' question is not: Why is there evil and suffering in the world? Or, Why do people act so badly? His question is: What are you doing with your own lives? That there is anger all around does not mean you have to live out of your anger. That there is violence or greed or hate does not mean that you have to buy into them. Because there is cruelty and torture does not mean that you become cruel and engage in torture. You are created and called to be part of God's continuing goodness and generosity.

James turns quickly from theology—God's unwavering goodness—to practice, how we live. First, listen. Stop talking so much. Jesus would often begin a parable by saying, Listen! After teaching, he would say, Let those who have ears listen! Jesus is not interested in our telling others what is right, what they should believe, or showing off how much we know. Jesus is interested in our having hearts and minds that are open and teachable. That happens as we learn to be quiet and listen, with our ears and the ears of our hearts.

That is why silence is so important. We talk in our community about the importance of practicing silence. Sometimes we talk more about silence than practice it! It is hard to stop the compulsion of talking and be quiet long enough to listen. It is hard to quit running around thinking we are doing good when all we are doing is adding confusion, stress, and exhaustion. It is hard to let our incessant thinking settle down so that we get beyond and beneath all those words and ideas to what is most real. Cultivating a listening silence enables us to stop living according to what others tell us we should do, out of compulsion or guilt or whatever. We listen deeply within ourselves to discern who we are called to be and what we are called to do. Silence and listening are essential for discerning the movements of God's spirit in and around us. Being persons and a community grounded in silence is the most radical thing we can be. It means we are not listening to the confusion and distractions of the world around us; we are listening first of all to God and our relationship with God.

James talks about anger. When we are hurt, we get angry. When we see injustice, we get angry. When someone doesn't give us what we want or do what we think they should do, we get angry. James will say more

about anger later on. For now, he says that anger, though a real human emotion, accomplishes nothing for God's purposes, even so-called "righteous anger." Anger only feeds anger and escalates toward violence. Listening deeply helps us be "slow to anger." We begin to understand the roots of our anger--our fear, hurt, or insecurity. Then our anger has less to feed on. Understanding and compassion, for ourselves and others, cuts the supply line to anger, and makes way for insight and positive action that is life-giving.

James reminds his readers that they are like gardens in which God has planted the word of the Gospel, the good news of God's love embodied in Jesus. They are to trust that implanted word and let it live at the center of their being. It is the source of their own salvation, their wholeness. This helps us rid ourselves of what James calls "sordidness and rank growth of wickedness." It is a matter of working with deeper insight into our own hearts, facing and embracing the garbage that is in us. Trying to drive out all the stuff we don't like or beat ourselves up about it never works and only makes things worse. What we try to suppress only ends up getting larger. That is why moralistic religion doesn't work. It only intensifies our guilt and distrust of ourselves.

We all have in us seeds of goodness and life, and seeds of destructiveness and suffering. When we try to throw out the "bad" seeds, we only increase their growth. So we learn to water the "good" seeds instead. Then we find that, over time, the other seeds simply wither away. Our watering, however, must be consistent and mindful, not haphazard and half-hearted. If I have a strong penchant for being critical of others—which, in fact, I have!—then I have to work with that every day, be aware of it, understand how and when it arises, and not feed it. I give fuller attention to growing in graciousness, non-judgment, and taking my hands off of other people. I am converting my garbage into flowers!

James sums up: Be doers of the word, not just those who hear it. Listen to the word of life. Then do what you hear. For James it is all about practice. Practice means living out what we say we believe and who we are. It is the same way we learn to play an instrument or paint or build with our hands. We keep trying and working with it until it becomes part of us. I do not know a serious person of faith who has not said on occasion: It is so hard to forgive! It is so hard to move beyond my comfort zone to be with people who are different! It is so hard to love others and myself! I have also not known a person who, having taken seriously this practice of faith, has not experienced over time significant progress and growth.

There is a Buddhist teaching that says don't mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself. Do not mistake religion for the life to which it points us. James is saying that the end of religion is not religion, but becoming truly human. Pure religion, he writes, consists of two things. First, "caring for orphans and widows," which is a biblical phrase that means all who are most vulnerable and in need. The test of true religion is whether its adherents are living compassionately, seeking to meet the needs of human beings, and today we must add, the needs of the earth, God's creation. The second thing is keeping ourselves "unstained by the world." That may sound old-fashioned, like those religious sects that withdraw from the world. That is not what James means. James means that we are to give primary attention to our spiritual lives and health. We are to recognize that there are some attitudes and movements in our society and world that are "toxic" to the kind of life to which we are called and for which we are created. We simply become aware of them and do not buy into them. Instead of withdrawing from the world, we become so spiritually grounded that we cannot be overtaken by what is contrary to what we see, learn, and know in Jesus.

All of this shows the priority of a consistent spiritual life, what we call the inward journey. Silence. Listening. Less talking about and more living out what we believe. Trusting the word of God's love in Christ that is planted in us. The inward journey leads us into practice, the outward journey. The true end, or fulfillment, of religion is the way we live our lives. For James it is simply listening and doing.

One year before he was executed by the Nazis, the young pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge," the child of his niece Renate and his closest friend Eberhard Bethge. Bonhoeffer had witnessed what happens when the church becomes absorbed in its own preservation, and, worse, when it buys into nationalism, power, and violence. He wrote toward the end of this piece: "...our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among [people]. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action." [*Letters and Papers from Prison*]. Our own community here was born out of such insight and sense of what God calls us to be and do--a community of those always on an inward journey--prayer, silence, inner listening--and an outward journey of doing what we hear, see, and learn in Jesus.