

September 2, 2012/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

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 wrote that Jesus is the end of religion. To me this has always meant that in Jesus we learn that religion, or religious devotion, rightly practiced, can lead us to our true humanity. Getting caught in religion for its own sake leads to spiritual unhealthiness, institutionalism, ignorance of and prejudice against those of other spiritual traditions than our own, and violence of word, thought, and action toward those perceived as enemies of "our faith." Religion is not an end in itself, but a means to discerning and living out our created nature.

The writer of the Letter of James would agree. The letter was written toward the end of the first century to Christian communities living in a world of violence and power. The writer is saying: I know the situation is very bad, but remain rooted in and faithful to 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. By being faithful to what is good and true, you contribute to what God is already doing to bring healing, peace, and wholeness. Keep living according to what you have heard and learned in Jesus.

The reading begins with a lovely and powerful image. Every act of generosity, every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights. God is pictured as perpetual goodness and benevolence shining forth from the heart of the universe. Dede Buhler's painting that hangs here in our chapel, entitled "Ever Present Love," reflects just what James is speaking of. James is saying to the struggling Christian communities that, though the situation around them feels hopeless, the essential nature of life is God's unchanging, non-discriminating goodness.

James' approach is simple. 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. We are created and called to be recipients and channels

of God's continuing goodness and generosity. That is our truest nature.

James then turns to practice, how we live in light of this understanding of God and ourselves. First, be quicker to listen than to talk. Jesus often began a parable by saying, Listen! When he finished, he would say, "Let those who have ears listen!" 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.

In our community we emphasize the importance of practicing silence. It is hard to stop our compulsive talking and be quiet long enough to listen deeply to others, to what is happening around us, and to our own inner life. 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 so that we get beyond and beneath all those words and ideas to what is most real, to where we can get true insight. 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 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, who we are in God, and to the world in its 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. When our expectations of others or life are disappointed, 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 perpetuates violence. I like the way another translation (*Contemporary English Bible*) puts it: "An angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness." Listening deeply helps us be "slow to anger." We begin to see the roots of our anger--our fear, hurt, insecurity. With patient, compassionate understanding of ourselves, we learn how not to get hooked by the things that stir up our anger. We stop feeding our anger. We are then able to practice understanding and compassion toward others. We also are able to get clearer insight into reality, discerning and letting go of the ego-centered illusions that we cling to. All of this cuts the supply line to anger, making way for actions and words that are truly loving and life-giving.

James uses a garden image as he tells his readers that God has planted in them the

word of the Gospel, the good news of God's love embodied in Jesus. 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." We are to welcome the implanted word with meekness, says James.

As I read these words today, I think how important it is for us to remain faithful to and go deeper into our own spiritual tradition, what is called the Gospel, or good news, of God's love as it is known and embodied in Jesus. We all are aware of how misrepresented the Christian gospel has been and is today. Churches get lost in political partisanship, nationalistic fervor, and militarism. Those who think of themselves as followers of Jesus, who taught nonviolence, love of enemies, and self-giving for the sake of others, are caught up in hate, hostility toward the poor and those on the margins of society, silence or denial when it comes to the abuse of children within church structures, and resurgent demeaning and controlling attitudes toward women.

There are many reasons one could simply give up on Christianity as a lost cause, if not an outright evil. But that is because we don't go deeply enough into our own spiritual tradition. We take the misrepresentations of Christian faith for the heart of Christian faith. We don't give the time and effort to the spiritual work needed by anyone in any spiritual tradition to get to the heart of it, and then to embody that essence in their own lives. This is why our community continues to lift up the importance of a committed, disciplined life of faith. It takes daily practices of reflection, study, contemplation, inner listening, awareness and alertness to "welcome with meekness the implanted word" so that it becomes the source of our own healing, our wholeness.

Be doers of the word, not just those who hear it. The root meaning of the word obedience is *listening*. For James it is all about practice. Practice means living out what we say we believe and who we are. This is the work of our spiritual life—listening and doing. 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 get beyond my ego and truly love others and myself! I have also not known a person who, having taken seriously this practice of faith, has not experienced over time a more authentic and meaningful life.

James is saying that the end, the goal, the fulfillment of religion is not religion, but becoming truly human. Religion can go either way. When religion becomes a matter of words, ideas, doctrines, structures, and institutions to be defended, it is worthless and, as James says, "those who think they are religious" are deceiving themselves.

Religion, however, can be the source of our liberation, leading us to our true selves and life as it is meant to be lived. Pure religion, or devotion, does not think of itself as “religious”. It 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.” The “world” is not the good creation of God but the world created by us humans and inhabited by whatever current demons tend to capture our spirits—power, wealth, violence, greed, fear, and so forth. James was not advocating withdrawal from the world around us. Here is a call 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. Our spiritual work is to become aware of them, see through them, and 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.

Anthony De Mello has some terrific words about this in his brief but potent commentary on Jesus' teaching that we must become like children if we are to enter the kingdom of God. His words helped me understand more deeply what it means to keep ourselves unstained by the world. *The reason why the child is able to preserve its innocence and live like the rest of creation the bliss of the kingdom is that it has not been sucked into what we call the world—that region of darkness inhabited by grown-ups whose lives are spent not in living but in courting applause and admiration; not in blissfully being themselves but in neurotically comparing and competing, striving for those empty things called success and fame even if they can be attained only at the expense of defeating, humiliating, destroying their neighbors. If you allow yourself to really feel the pains of this hell on earth, the utter emptiness it brings, you might experience within you a revolt, a disgust so powerful that it will shatter the chains of dependence and deceit that have been forged around your soul and you will break loose into the kingdom of innocence where mystics and children dwell.* (The Way to Love, p. 76)

All of this shows the importance of a consistent spiritual life, what we call the inward journey. Silence. Listening. Trusting and deepening our understanding of the word of God's love in Jesus that is planted in us. The inward journey leads us into practice, the outward journey. The end, or fulfillment, of religion is the way we live our lives. And it is to that journey that we commit ourselves as Covenant and Community Members in this community.