

“To Believe is To Care; To Care is To Do”

James 1:17-27

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The epistle of James is Christian wisdom liturgy. He's writing a skill set for early Christians; there are more than 100 imperatives to the early Christians contained within this short letter. James repeats the fundamentals of Jesus' message. He writes: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." The back of your bulletin says that an 11th commandment might be "to care for orphans and widows in their distress." So important was this admonition because orphans and widows in James' and Jesus' time (as well as that of the prophets) were most vulnerable in a world in which they were left behind and left out of the social order.

We may ask what did James mean when he said "to keep oneself unstained from the world." The early Christians were called to a life different than those around them. It's why they were persecuted; they rocked the boat; they resisted the status quo--even the religious status quo. It must have been tempting to want not to be different, to fit in, to avoid persecution.

But faithfulness to Christ meant that like Christ, they were to live distinct lives of pure religion, and James points out that pure religion has all to do with caring for those in distress and showing a mercy that the world does not show. Pure religion has little to do with judging others. It has little to do with belonging to one church versus another. It has little to do with ideology. It has everything to do with mercy, justice, and walking humbly with God.

It's interesting that James puts *listening* at the top of his list of virtues. He says be quick to listen but slow to speak. James encourages "active listening". You know the difference when you talk with someone, whether they are paying attention to what you're saying or just waiting to interject their wisdom when you take a breath. It is one of life's greatest gifts to be REALLY heard. James says Christians are to be quick to listen and slow to speak. This admonition might give us pause in how we relate to one another. When speech comes too rapidly, it often takes the form of judgment. When I listen to others, especially if they are expressing themselves too loudly, I ask myself, what life experiences, what source of pain or fear is behind their angry words.

I tried to do this last Wednesday when I attended a luncheon sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. A Congressman was the guest speaker, and no sooner had he begun than the gentleman who by coincidence was sitting beside me started to shout. And not long after his outburst, someone on the opposite side of the room, started to shout opposing views. They both needed to hear James words: "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." It's OK to be angry when one you love is sick or you see an injustice. But anger is most powerful when used judiciously and without personal attack. One might wonder what difficulties the church to whom James was writing was dealing with.

But James moves this early Christian community from a place of anger to a place of action; "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." There are many ways to be doers. "To do" may mean offering food, extending hospitality, raising money, mobilizing for a just cause, tutoring children, teaching Sunday school, standing for peace, singing your song, giving your insight and intellect, providing strong arms and legs to do the heavy lifting,

growing flowers to touch souls with beauty, sharing a word of encouragement, telling the truth when the truth is hard to tell. It certainly means caring for the orphans and widows and the left behind and left out. "To do" most authentically is to find for yourself the ways God calls you to be a witness to the gospel; others may find their call to be the same as yours; or their call may be a different but nonetheless just as compelling. God needs a variety of "doers" to witness to the word.

The title of this sermon is a logo of the United Church years before "God Is Still Speaking" became popular. "To Believe is To Care: To Care is To Do". To believe is not only a one time confession that Jesus is Sovereign of our lives; to believe is a constant confession not merely in words but also in actions that SHOWS the world that what was important to Jesus is important to us. "To Do" at it's best, is in response to gratitude, not guilt. We care when our hearts can no longer contain our gratitude, and we express our gratitude to God through reaching out into a world in need.

It has been a long hot August. The rhetoric heard around us has also been heated. It's been angry. Where is the source of this anger? I think there is deep rooted fear. The topic of health reform brings to the surface our fear of dying; we're afraid of something being taken away from us that we think we deserve. Many things in our world (things we counted on as being secure) have gone badly over the past several years.

Over five years ago I was privileged to be called here to be your pastor. One reason I was able to say yes to that call was because I was and am married to Tom which meant that the church did not need to pay for my health insurance; that meant, you could afford me. Tom's work took care of that for which I was and am grateful. I was blessed because I believe this is a good place for me to serve and I hope and pray that you'll continue to have me.

I don't think this will happen, but God forbid that Tom should die of his cancer; I won't have health insurance, and it will be hard for me to get any I can afford at my age with a bum ankle and high cholesterol, and I'm going to be too young for MediCare for some years. Yet many people who are happy with their insurance oppose plans that might help people like me. All the time people are financially bankrupted because they can't afford health care.

Jesus was a healer. He cared about whether people were well. He especially cared whether those who no one else cared for were healed. I just don't see anyway around it. As Christians who try to live like Jesus, we have to care and to do, so that people have health care. Today on my first Sunday back I would have preferred to do a "feel good" sermon, an "I'm so glad to see you after my vacation, sermon". But James dictated otherwise. How can I call myself one who follows Christ, if I don't stand up for health reform.

I believe this long hot summer of discontent is a spiritual problem. We don't want to die. We don't want something taken from us that will keep us alive. We don't want to share what we think we deserve because we've worked so hard to get it. It is a spiritual problem to face the fact that we do not control nor do we deserve our very lives. As James says, "every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God of lights." The only way to ultimately secure our lives is to trust them to the love of God and join God in being doers of the word. And here trust is not passive relinquishment but active co-creation with God.

I heard on the news the other night a man who had interviewed Ted Kennedy, and he asked Kennedy what drove him to fight for the causes he did. And Kennedy replied, "haven't you ever read the New Testament?" James calls us to not only be hearers of the word, but doers also. "To believe is to care, and to care is to do." May God give us strength and courage to act faithfully today and in the days to come.