

September 2, 2018 Sermon: Being Love

James 1: 16-27 (The Message)

So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures. Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like. But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action. Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (NRSV)

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles. So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

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What does it mean to make a salvation garden of your life? What does it mean for God to landscape our lives? What does it mean for God to shape us and plant in us “good traits” of the Christian life? What does it mean to live as a Christian and be love? How do we practice what we preach?

Our scriptures ask us to ponder these questions. For me, they prompted memories of a youth group mission trip with my youth group from Cape Cod, MA, to Harlem in New York City. Our high school youth group and adult leaders were guests of the Union Congregational Church of Harlem for a weekend in the summer.

Their Pastor, Ron and I met at a meeting in our UCC headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio. Our conference covered many subjects but one that we found important was improving race relationships in our UCC churches. The conference leaders encouraged work on improving race relationships between youth who lived in predominantly white communities and youth who live in predominantly black communities. Ron and I thought it would be great to put into action what we were learning as pastors by inviting our youth groups to meet.

So, our youth group from more rural Cape Cod, Massachusetts went to NYC to meet Ron's youth group in Harlem in the heart of New York City.

As I was reading through some notes about that weekend, I found this summary that one of our youth wrote for our church after we returned to give a report on the visit.

He said, "On the second day of our NYC trip, we spent most of the day walking around the September 11th Memorial and eating Chinese food but the rest of the night we took the subway into Harlem. We had an invitation from the Union Congregational Church youth group in Harlem to spend some time getting to know each other, and have dinner together. As we took the ride we were all nervous. One reason was because we had never met these kids and we felt there might be some awkward moments. The other reason was that we were running late. When we arrived at the church, they unlocked the front doors and showed us around."

"Then we met Orville, Siedah, Louel, Tyrie, Mortimer, JJ, Tiani, and Rev. William-Wells. At first, both youth groups felt awkward because we did not know each other, but, as the evening went on, Rev. Williams-Wells asked us to sit beside someone that we didn't know. So, we all sat around and talked about racial remarks to white and black people. Some things that we discussed were: music, sports, and academics."

"After talking we gave the Harlem youth group gifts, like traditional Cape Cod t-shirts and our famous taffy. Then, we all picked a partner from the other group to walk with to the Harlem Hospital and to the Sham-Berg Museum. That was a great museum because it taught us about African American history.....At the end of night, our youth group had to head back to the hostel where we were staying in NYC. The Harlem youth group walked us to the subway, well, more like we all laughed our way to the subway because we had become friends at this point. In just the few hours we hung out, we became close. We had so much fun that day that we forgot why we were nervous in the first place."

What good memories! I am glad I kept those reports in my file written by youth on the trip so I could remember their impressions from that special weekend in late June. Remembering this trip and the youth on the trip, reminded me "why" we need to talk and act on our beliefs.

This is the message of James we read today. Let's do some review of the background of the Epistle of James before we begin to exegete the passage for today. What do we know about the Epistle of James in the New Testament?

What kind of letter is it? James is considered New Testament wisdom literature: like Proverbs and Sirach. It consists largely of moral exhortations and precepts of a traditional and eclectic nature. The content of James is directly parallel, in many instances, to sayings of Jesus found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew.

Who wrote James? We don't know for sure, but much evidence points to James, the brother of Jesus. He was a leader in the Jerusalem church.

When was it written? It was probably written before 62 CE, the year James was killed. The 50s saw the growth of turmoil and violence in Roman Judea as Jews became more and more frustrated with corruption, injustice and poverty. It continued into the 60s, four years before James was killed. War broke out with Rome and would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the people.

What messages are in James? The epistle is a teaching letter. It is addressed to the suffering of the Jewish people. James includes exhortations on fighting poverty and caring for the poor in practical ways in that time of upheaval and violence. The letter encourages Christian Jews not to revert to violence in their response to injustice and poverty but to stay focused on doing good, staying holy and embracing the wisdom of heaven, not that of the world.

Framed within an overall theme of patient perseverance during trials and temptations, James writes to encourage believers to live consistently with what they have learned in Christ. He wants his readers to mature in their faith in Christ by living what they say they believe. He condemns various sins, including pride, hypocrisy, favoritism, and slander. He encourages believers to humbly live by godly rather than worldly wisdom and to pray in all situations.

What makes James unique?

Within the New Testament canon, the Epistle of James is noteworthy because it makes no reference to the death, resurrection, or divine sonship of Jesus. It refers to Jesus twice, as "the Lord Jesus Christ" and as "our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1, 2:1).

Today's reading stresses these points:

1. The gifts of God are good and complete (teleios), coming down from above (1:17).
2. Good communication is essential for harmony and peace. He counsels the value of listening and of keeping a cool head (James 1:19), It's okay to disagree and be angry but we must use that anger constructively.
3. James outlines the characteristics of true religion. What is of God and what is not? We have freedom—how do we use it?

Throughout these verses, James invites the question: "What does it mean to live in our world today and be a Christian?" How do you answer this question?

Going back to my story about the MA youth group visiting Harlem, I was reminded of the gift that the Harlem youth group gave to those in my group. We took them taffy and t-shirts; they gave us each a copy of the little book *Warriors Don't Cry* a memoir by Melba Patillo Beals.

First published in 1994. *Warriors Don't Cry* begins when Melba and eight other black men and women in their forties returning to their home state of Arkansas to meet the then-governor, Bill Clinton.

Melba, the narrator and author, explains that the group, called the Little Rock Nine, is visiting Central High School in Little Rock. As teenagers in 1957, the nine of them were the first African-American students to be integrated into the school.

The History? When Melba was twelve years old, the Supreme Court ruled that separate schools for whites are illegal, a ruling called *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In the year after the ruling, Melba and her family see very little change in segregation. She is still at an all-black high school. Everything changes when she and sixteen other black students sign up to attend the white school.

Because of the threat of violence, the number of black students who will participate in the integration of the white high school is decreased from seventeen to nine. Those nine students would make history, putting words into actions. Several times in the few days before school is supposed to start, lawsuits are filed that threaten to stop the nine students.

Governor Faubus declares that he is going to send the Arkansas National Guard to the high school, though he does not say whether they are there to protect the nine or to stop them from entering the school. Finally, a few days after school has started, federal court judge Ronald Davies orders that the students be allowed to attend.

On September 3, 1957, Melba and her mother drive to Central High School for Melba's first day of class. A huge white mob has gathered, and the Arkansas National Guard encircles the school.

Luckily, both Melba and her mother make it to and from school unharmed. But, days following, Melba is not allowed to leave her house or answer the door or the phone.

As we would expect, Melba tells her grandmother that she wants to go back to Horace Mann, her old high school. Her grandmother insists that Melba is not a quitter. Melba is a warrior and warriors don't cry and don't quit.

I find that message in the gospel lesson from Mark. Jesus taught his disciples not to be quitters. Yes, the people in the time lived under harsh conditions. We know this from the study of James. The people wanted to practice their faith and observe the traditions of the Jewish way of life but it was not from the heart.

Washing hands before meals was not just for proper hygiene but a way of respect for the ritual in the Jewish faith. Jesus saw these rituals needed to come from the heart because they had a deeper meaning. Jesus did not want people to stop the ritual but to understand what it meant to follow it. Not quitting meant speaking about what it meant and how it honored God.

Jesus saw, clearly, the ugliness of human hearts and he does not turn away. He is not a quitter! He tells his disciples to beware when piety gets in the way of fulfilling the heart of the law: loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. This is what it means to be faithful. This is the call of Christ to us.

We are glad for the story that Melba put in writing. We are glad that our message as an adult was the message of our grandmother about pressing on and doing what was right, from the heart. Here she was, a young teenager up against the forces of evil, up against people who call themselves Christian and committed to the way of Christ. Melba and others did not quit.

The small act of defiance of nine black children entering an all-white school took on such significance because it threatened to change the way white segregationists wielded their power. With this and many other acts, integrationists such as Melba showed that the power of the white segregationists was a fragile illusion. Once blacks—even just a few of them—stopped consenting, the power structure began to fail.

Melba learns that nobody has any power to hurt her unless she gives it to them. This simple act of refusing to be afraid when people threatened her changed not just the way Melba saw herself but also the way other people saw her. This was the message of Jesus, wasn't it?

Jesus tried to teach those who would follow him that the power structures of the day would start to fall because of the bold acts of those who resisted evil. Real religion true faith, faith from heart was not quitting. It was reaching out to the homeless and loveless and guarding the weak and doing what was right.

We know today that the struggle entailed more than one person's desire to go to a better high school or eat at a better diner or ride in the front of the bus. Melba's struggle was a symbol of a quest to improve the lives of black people all over the country. Melba's participation in this quest is why her grandmother calls her one of God's warriors. We take on that title for ourselves and know that it means we want our faith to make a difference. We want our words and our actions to improve the lives of all God's children.

Jesus tried to open eyes and hearts, so, he pressed a point. He said our focus should be love. We should take action and always let faith come from our hearts. I told you one of my stories about a youth group meeting new people in a new place and taking action to understand another person's life and place they live. What is your experience with words and actions that make a difference in how we move forward in life?

May we ask ourselves, “Who has been an example or inspiration to you of faith, honesty or compassion?”

When looking in a mirror, what do you see in yourself as a disciple, leader and child of God?

In a world of division, how does our congregation help bridge diverse people, cultures and opinions?

May our questions, our answers, our intentions, indeed, honor God and one another. May our words, our actions come from the heart and reflect our desire to be love, to be God’s love for a hurting world. Amen.