

St James United Church

Message for August 29, 2021
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost



“Doing and Hearing” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; James 1:17-27; and Mark 7:1-15, 21-2

When I told people in Ontario that I had accepted a call to this congregation, it didn't take long for folks to start making jokes about James going to St. James. I shouldn't have been surprised given that a few of you were making the same quip. But unlike all of the people who made that particular connection, I was struck by another one, how this church just may be named for the author of my favourite New Testament epistle, a portion of which we heard this morning. Only John's First letter with its emphasis on God as love comes close to James in my opinion.

I like the letter of James because unlike various letters of Paul with their strong theological bent, the focus of James is much more practical, about making one's faith real in the world. We will get a good sense of this over the next few weeks, summed up at the end of today's portion – “be doers of the word and not just hearers.” The author spells out what this means, saying pure religion is caring for orphans and widows, and remaining unstained by the world.

As we look at what is going on in the world, especially in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, the need to care for widows and orphans needs to be global in scope. But you'd never know that given how some Christians talk. Instead, historically we've focused on remaining unstained, as if James thought that the world is tainted, especially anything to do with our bodies. Hence an emphasis on sexuality in some denominations. But as I consider what Jesus says about eating and washing, I hear him appreciate our bodiliness. He didn't stress about when someone washed or what they ate. He was more concerned with how they treated others. In the reading there is mention of adultery but as part of a list with murder, theft, greed, envy, pride, deceit – all attitudes that place an individual's wants over the needs of others. In the passage he also challenged those who hid behind religious customs as a way to avoid caring for their parents. Rather than focus on sexuality, Jesus was more concerned about the abuse of power, economic injustice, practices that excluded others.

James understood this. Hence pairing the care of orphans and widows with not becoming mired in the ways of the world. The world from James' view is not our planet (where our bodies come from) but our culturally conditioned attitudes and social norms, especially ones that hold us back from caring for the most vulnerable. These are what can prevent us from being more than hearers of the word, culture shaping our behaviour more than our spirituality. How often have you heard said about people who are struggling that “they need to take responsibility”, without awareness of the person's life experience? It goes along with the maxim, surprisingly said by a few Christians, that “people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps”, as if we

live in isolation, without impacts of intergenerational advantages or challenges. In contrast, is the saying that “it takes a village to raise a child”. That one feels more in line with Jesus’ actual teachings. At its root I hear the spiritual value that we are connected, that we’re all one. Which saying we quote depends on the narrative we let shape our consciousness and, by extension, our conversations and social policies.

Culture can be hard to shake, which is why I believe it takes more than just reading the bible to be shaped by the word. Otherwise, we’ll be, as James says, like the person who looks in the mirror then forgets what he looks like. I know that I need to open my heart to the source of it all, to God, who as James wrote in the beginning of this morning’s reading is the Father of lights. It’s a profound image because light is a symbol of Holy Wisdom, *sophia* in Greek, *chokmah* in Hebrew. Both feminine. God comes from above, a union of both masculine and feminine, to be united with us, wanting to be with us in love. In First John we are told that Love is God’s nature. But this idea is presented quite provocatively in “The Song of Solomon.” As an erotic poem it very much celebrates bodiliness. Yet in Judaism and Christianity it has been viewed as a poem about God and Israel or God and the Church. The fruitfulness of Spring and then Summer comes about when the divine joins with their bride, us. In this we are not just shaped by words, but shaped by the Word, by Holy Wisdom, by union with Christ.

That divine union is made possible through prayer. When I was small, I was taught to say my prayers. This isn’t a bad thing but it’s also not enough. Imagine if in your marriage, or with a friend, you spent all of the time talking and never listening to the other person... To be shaped by the Word, we need to take time for contemplation. As I shared last week, there are many ways to do this but a method I practice is called centering prayer in which I sit receptively open to God. I, like any of us, have monkey mind, that is, I’m barraged with thoughts, feelings, sensations. But as they come, I let them go. Over time I become more conscious of less savoury thoughts, the greed, envy, pride Jesus reminds us are the root of negative behaviour. But as I let them rise then fall, without judgement, I slowly train my mind to notice them in my day to day, and to let them go before I act. This is crucial because a big part of contemplation is the discovery that God isn’t distant, judging me, especially for being embodied, but is within me, because God always becomes what God loves. The divine spark that was a living flame in Jesus, is in me, is in everyone, and all things. In openness to God, I discover the truth of the spiritual maxim - we are all one. If that is the case, then I do need to care for orphans, widows, anyone who’s vulnerable, and anywhere.

As I shared earlier, I like how James calls us to action. But as a fan of John as well, I believe that action needs to be shaped by contemplation. In his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here*, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. explains why: “Power without love is reckless and abusive... love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.” Those words come from a heart shaped by the Word. When we pair doing and hearing, we will see the changes that our world needs, because they will come from hearts that have been transformed, from our deep connection in God. May it be so. Amen.