

*Messages to the Community of God: Humbly Accepting the Word Implanted in Us*

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 2, 2012

**James 1: 17-27**

We begin a new series on James – Messages to the Community of God

– James has some practical things to say for our living Christianly

– Avoiding favoritism, showing our faith by what we do, keeping our tongue in check, resisting evil, handling suffering, and prayer

The assumption has been made that a practical faith has to do with giving us helpful steps for living – learning how to do this and how to do that.

It is true that God is interested in what goes on in our daily lives – it does matter to God about us.

But that does not make life, or faith, or our relationship with God, **just about us.**

Since the 1980s the North American church has become a consumeristic church, vending religious goods and services for thousands of people looking for a Christian faith that works and brings success in life.

Yet, James in expressing what religion is states: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1: 27).

I remember a favorite movie of my daughters, – *Hook* – with Robin Williams as Peter Banning (who once was Peter Pan – who had fallen in love with Wendy’s granddaughter and so never returned to Neverland).

Peter grew up, became a financier – a pirate – putting work before family.

Well Hook – played by Dustin Hoffman, kidnaps Peter’s kids because he wanted back the old days with Peter Pan.

For Peter Banning to rescue his kids he had to go back to Neverland and rediscover his identity as Peter Pan.

In a final scene, in the confrontation between Hook and Peter, Peter’s daughter realizes that Peter Pan is her dad – that always choked me up – but that’s not the point of my story.

In the middle of the swashbuckling, Smee, Hook’s first mate, runs around trying to figure out what to do asking, “What about Smee? What about Smee?”

As his asking becomes “what about me? What about me?” he fills bags with gold and jewels to make his escape.

North American Christianity also asks “what about me?” “what about me?”

**We believe in God, in Jesus, but in a way as God having relevance for me.**

That is what has driven our consumer Christianity – shopping for the right church and right programs to take care of us and our needs.

North American Christianity is all about “me!”

And so seeker sensitive approaches became popular – relevant, practical sermons were what people wanted – with titles like: “Ten Steps to Affair Proof Your Marriage” or “Five Steps to Financial Freedom” or “Eight Ways to Change Your Circumstances”

– the Bible being a mere answer book for the marital, financial or life struggles we face.

We would have time for widows and orphans, but only after we asked, “what about me?”

Yes, discipleship in following Jesus is meant to be practical – after all it has to do with how we live our lives every day – **what being incarnational is!**

And so James has some very practical things to say about how we are to live out our faith in real life circumstances – **but practical faith does not come in response to the question, “what about me?”**

**It comes in response to receiving and accepting what God is doing in us,**

**It comes in response to the work that God is doing in the world through us.**

The believers James was writing to were also asking the same kind of question – “what about me?” “what about us?”

Their circumstances, in many respects were more dire than ours, because they were beginning to experience persecution for being followers of Jesus. Where was God? What about me?

Anne shares that as a chaplain intern at Advocate Condell Medical Center in the CPE program that this is a common question.

Many patients struggle with their faith in the midst of their cancer, in the midst of their chronic condition – and ask, “why is God doing this to me?” “where is God?” “what about me?”

James response might seem trite:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Your response might be: What the hell does he mean by that?

Is God doing this? Is God causing my difficulties? Is God allowing this? Why should I consider this joy?

But James says, **no you’ve got it wrong** – it’s not God doing any of this – when tempted to blame God, James says, “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone”

Rather, when we look at life as though it is all about us, all about me

– we get sidetracked and we get caught up in being preoccupied with ourselves

– which leads to feeling sorry for ourselves

– and perhaps leads to a downward spiral, even our own destruction – death.

**What makes faith practical faith is identifying with Jesus and living in the way of Jesus – in the midst of every day life**

**– it does not begin with asking “what about me?”**

**Rather it begins with what James expresses, “humbly accepting what God has planted in us.”**

James says, “every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights [who] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

**“Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the world planted in you, which can save you.”**

These two statements are the foundation of practical faith.

**How is this practical?**

Let me backtrack a bit.

In the midst of all this, James launches into a communications lesson: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”

**Why stick this in the middle here? What is James saying with this?**

I think he is talking **about the agendas that drive our lives, shape our lives. He is talking about our concern with “me”**

Tell me, who are the ones who are the opposite: slow to listen, quick to speak and quick to become angry? People who are about their own agendas, people who constantly ask, “what about me?” are ones who are

- slow to listen to the ideas of others
- quick to speak about their perspectives trying to get the buy-in of others
- and when others refuse or don’t understand their position, frustration can ensue even anger.

Yet, when we are quick to listen

– being open to others;

Slow to speak – giving room for others to express themselves, their views, we have little to defend or get angry about **because we are setting aside our agendas.**

Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry is **a pattern of setting aside our own agendas so that we might make space in our lives to receive the gifts of God – from God and through others.**

The same meaning is behind James statement about “not merely listening to the word, but do what it says.”

When we are about our own agendas, we use the word of God for our own ends, we make it say what we want it to say

– we hear it in a way we want to hear it – and we end up doing our own thing (following Word of God).

But to listen to it, and do what it says – especially when it talks about widows and orphans, the poor and marginalized, the weak and sick or imprisoned, **is to set aside our own agendas which try to coerce faith and God to be servants of our own desires,**

## **When we are open to God**

– no matter what is going on in our own lives = we are more apt to “consider [all what goes on in life] with pure joy”

There can be nothing more practical than setting aside our own agendas and being open to God, to participate with God in God’s mission of making all things new.

**Believe it or not, but this “saves” us – it liberates us from our penchant to make what God is doing in the world all about us – and sets us free to participate with God in God’s action of restoring humanity and creation.**

In setting aside our penchant for ourselves, we are open to what God desires to cultivate in us.

**The one thing that James expresses that puts us in such a posture is: “Humbly accept the word planted in you.” Word: Jesus, Bible . . .**

In humbly accepting the word planted in us, we open ourselves to God’s moving in and through us.

We open ourselves to God’s Spirit.

In humility we set aside our own plans and agendas for ourselves and become open to what God is doing all around us

**– giving space to God to cultivate new creation in us.**

That was a hard lesson for me to learn – led to my leaving the pastorate in ’93. In an agenda driven way I was leading in a way that did harm to people – pushing my own agenda as if it was God’s agenda for a community.

Living Christianly, living practically

**is not about our taking charge of our own lives to live in a certain way,**

It is about a different way of being

– a practice of receiving and being open to the things of God so that the Spirit lives through our lives in ways that are practical.

**To live practically is to have a different vision of God.**

God is the giver of good and perfect gifts – gifts that birth us into a new kind of life.

Humbly accepting the word planted in us is about **a foundational action** in our lives

**– giving space for God to do what God desires to do in us.**

Living Christianly, living missionally, living practically has everything to do with giving space for God’s Word to take root and grow in us.

How?

1. Be in a posture of openness . . .
2. Examine closely – perhaps a daily Examen (St. Ignatius)

James compares such examination as “looking intently into the perfect law” and uses the comparative imagery of remembering what we look like when we walk away from a mirror when we have taken a close look at ourselves in it.

*To look intently* is to examine closely, to inspect curiously, to bend over to get a better look, to look into something.

I can see Jeff taking a look at a plant he had never seen before  
– there would be an intensesness about his examination.

In the same way, we are to examine intently the word God is planting and cultivating in us, in relation to all that is going on in and around us.

3. Give heed to what you discover. Allow it to shape your attitudes and actions in your day to day encounters.

In this way we are about *doing the word, not just listening to it*.

When that happens, we discover life begins to me less about “what about me?”

**And it becomes more what is important to God and our place in what God is about doing in the world in the lives of others and us.**

**And as we do,**

- we find ourselves walking with Jesus, looking after orphans and widows and staying focused on the things of God
- keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world.

**This is what James calls practical religion, practical faith – what God accepts as pure and faultless.**

May we live practically in this way – surrendering to God our desire to make faith all about us – and begin to realize that participating with God begins with humbly accepting the word planted in us!

**We will discover a very different “me” when we do so.**