

Sunday August 30th, 2009 Ladner United Church – 1000hrs
JIM SHORT Preacher

THE BOOK OF JAMES – PART 1 OF 4 – AN INTRODUCTION

James 1:17-27

1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

1:18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

1:19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;

1:20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

1:21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

1:23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

1:24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

1:25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.

1:26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

1:27 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.

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I grew in the United Church and both formally joined the Church through profession of faith as a young person as well as making a personnel commitment to God through Jesus at a church camp...

Like any young person – I don't think its different in any age as a teenager – there are choices to be made, temptations to be faced, peer pressure to contend with...

so as a young person and a Christian – I found the Letter of James to be very helpful for me in integrating what I had chosen to believe about God, my relationship to God – my spirituality and my lifestyle and choices...

The book (and its not really correspondence like some of the other NT letters) – brings to gether various practical wisdom proverb like writings in a kind of practical tract for people living as Christians in the world...how to sync your inner believe and faith with your outer life and action – what does that look like, how do you behave, how do

you deal with a variety of issues – his goal and hope is for us Christians to discover the necessary endurance to live our whole life as both “hearers” of God’s Grace and “Doers” of the path of discipleship laid down by Jesus – can do this – “true religion”

(Jesus Database on Line) –The style of James is the greek form of a diatribe (today a kind of abusive, bitter speech) but originally it was a prolonged discourse that presents a series of rapid fire questions and answers to an imaginary opponent that, by the very nature of the answers – sets the framework for the argument...

Scholars debate whether the writer was James, the brother of Jesus who after his death and resurrection went on to become the leader of the Jerusalem church or someone writing using his name to establish authority...

- whoever wrote James – he only mentions Jesus once –but he exhibits profound knowledge and understanding of his teachings....

one of the disadvantages of the lectionary is we get the bible passages in pieces – like a pie – a slice here and there

so...I’ve decided – spend four weeks on Book of James

this week – introduction/overarching theme

Sept 13 – Speaking and hearing – relate to each other

Sept 20 – Dealing with Conflict

Sept 27 – Prayer

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video...God is Love (from the work of the people website) It shows the scripture texts making reference to Christians loving their neighbour set against demonstrations of Christians with signs protesting and using hateful language and titles...

The video gives a powerful message – around the contradictions that often exist within Christians and are perceived by others in a whole different way...

James is aware of this as well as we are...

we say we believe in God’s love – yet our actions can seem hateful

seek to be inclusive as God is – our church communities sometimes seem exclusive and inhospitable

begins by defining God’s nature – who is God...?

begins on a negative...

“No one, when tempted, should say ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. “ James 1:13

my child has died – God only gives us burdens God knows we can carry
this horrible experience is God’s way of making me a better person
your life would not be falling apart if it was not God’s will

if you believe this and you hear yourself using this kind of “witness” with others – you’ve failed Theology 101 and its back to school...

God, James is the “Father” or mother/ parent of Lights...

every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift comes from God...

in fulfillment of God’s own purpose, he gave us birth by the word of truth (Jesus)

so that we would become a kind of “first fruits” to God’s creatures (the world)

with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change...

what a beautiful image for the one God...

God is a giver – God’s nature is giving – gift

giving birth, giving of oneself, giving love – we use that word to express an action that begins “here” (place your hand upon your hearts) and goes to the “other” (move your hands out)

that never changes...try to say giving and clutching your hands to your heart to cover it up and hold it back – it does not work – it does not feel right

in other words God is not fickle – God’s not giving on Monday and Tuesday and then Wednesday he has a change of heart – and says gee I’m going to make Jim’s life a living misery and I’ll pick up the giving thing again on Thursday...

all the “bad” stuff of life – the list is long – it doesn’t mean it won’t happen to us – sin, death and evil – but rather its source is in something other than God...

Being a Christian doesn’t mean we are better or superior to anyone else – means being transformed by Grace – inside – soaked in the hot tub of life...

we know that our whole being is dependent upon our being – joined to the vine – God – that’s how fruit grows...

James is using the a concept of God from Greek and Platonic philosophy and Jewish theology modified by his experience of God through the person of Christ...(page 14. Proper 17 – Feasting on the Word – Year B Volume 4 – these two concepts following come from there)

In Greek philosophic thought, every being has its origin in the highest being who is often named or described by concepts such as
Source, life, light, Good, Truth, Idea.

Each being receives energy from the Source...(use the idea of electricity and bulbs) and in Greek system – there was a hierarchy – closer to the top – the more light – closer to the bottom – the less light

Calling the Christian God – the Father of Light – James is saying that every life giving gift we receive...comes from the source which is God who energizes us...

James dismisses the sense of hierarchy – no variation or shadow due to change...everyone who then opens to the gift...receives the same abundance of light...life...good gifts...

in receiving those “good gifts” or “light” – opening ourselves to it – experience the transformation and the new birth...

its implanted in us and its grows and we begin to see ourselves and others in that light...

its an amazing image...

Who is God...the giver of gifts

Who am I – the gifted...I have received the gifts from God

What is life about then...here James goes on our “faith” cannot stop with inner transformation...

so he then welds his revised understanding of the Christian God seem through Greek philosophical thought to Jewish Rabbinical law...which requires that it is not enough for us to simply

that we are of the Light

we must also be “doers” of this and let light shine through us...

Who is God...the giver of gifts..

Who am I – the gifted...the first fruits

What his my life about...it is about giving...about generosity...about being a giving person

If I am going to be a parent and “give” life to a child – by birth or adoption – I’d better be a generous person

If I am going to be in a marriage life long covenant with someone – and give them my hand – I’d be be a generous person

and for James – being generous is at the heart of the faith and at the same time - the most difficult thing to do...

because though created and redeemed by a Generous God...we live in a self centered, self gratifying me first society...

so much so that very small acts of generosity often become big news story...and we are surprised that someone would be generous...

in a world where “reality” television has created a whole genre of entertainment based upon human destructive selfishness...

and dysfunctional glamorous rich people have this amazing ability to captivate us...and they become idols to base our lives upon

James dips into his Jewish heritage and uses the Jewish Ethical Catchphrase...”Widows and Orphans” to describe how we should live our faith

When he says that phrase he and his listeners would understand that it is a symbol phrase that sums up in three words “widows and orphans” the whole Jewish law...

(we’ll explore over the next weeks some of those practical things for James)

A side bar – understanding Widows and Orphans in Jewish Theology from (Jesus Data base on line)

If a man's wife died – though he had to still raise the children – he was still the beneficiary of his position, the protections of the Law, his estate and the option to marry again

If a woman's husband died – she lost his estate, she had no protector before the law or before the ravages of her relatives – the only thing she owned was the clothes upon her back – she did not have the option of marriage because the decision to marry was made on the part of the man, not the woman

powerless and helpless

likewise the orphan...lost the legal and economic protection of a father but also the compassion of the mother... only the help of another family member or neighbour – if it was extended could save that orphan from slavery, starvation and destitution

“In other words – “Widows and orphans” was the Hebrew way of talking about anyone who was among the most vulnerable, marginalized, exploited and oppressed of that society”

Many passages in Hebrew Scripture and Prophetic writings – where God says I don't want fancy church services, rituals and words, I want justice, mercy and compassion...

True Religion – its not just a lot of talk about how much we love Jesus but neither is it about doing lots of things – it is a kind of God ordained and guided unity – like walking – two feet (being and doing) working in unison...

On Friday Cathy and I drove to Comox – and on Saturday morning at the beginning of the new day, on the beach by the water as the Sun shone...I took part in a marriage ceremony for two young people – Natasha and Rob – members of the army who were part of my flock and under my spiritual care when in Afghanistan...

I'd been thinking all week about this reading from James – and I suspect like you – I often feel there is so much that needs to be done....does what I or you do really matter...is there any hope...

sense of giving up

will that time ever come when the schools of all the world's children have everything that they need and the armed forces need to have bake tables and garage sales to buy their equipment...

At the wedding was an amazingly beautiful very young flower girl whose job was to be the pedal dropper...

She was exquisite to watch

almost painful in her perfection and dedication

she did it so perfectly

such a small thing...

but every so slowly – took one peddle at a time – dropped it...and then another – straight and even...

for her – this was the most important aspect of the wedding – nothing beyond her mattered – she was determined to do her small part well and to the best of her ability unaware of the whole but somehow knowing that the success of the whole depended upon her small part...I don't even think she she knew that every eye was upon her...

It was a holy moment for me – I watched with fascination and I realized that’s what James wants me to do with my faith and gifts....

A closing thought: (from Resources for Preaching and Worship – Year B)

I think James would agree – William Law – 1978 – A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life

“Our power of doing external acts of love and goodness is often very narrow and restrained. There are, it may be, but few people to who we can contriute any worldly relief.

But though our outward means of doing good are often thus limited, yet if our hearts are but full of love and goodness we get, as it were , an infinite power because God will attribute to us those good works, those acts of love and tender charities, which we sincerely desire and would gladly have preformed had it been in our power.

You cannot heal all the sick, relieve all the poor; you cannot comfort all in distress nor be a parent to all the oprhans. You cannot, it may be, deliver many from their misfortunes or teach them to find comfort in God.

But if there is a love and tenderness in your heart that delights in these good works and excites you to do all that you can, if your love has no bounds but continually wishes and prays for the relief and happiness of all that are in distress, you will be received by God as a benefactor to those who have had nothing from you, but your good will and tender affections.”

Thanks be to God.