

"Be Love"
James 1:17-27

I recently went to a dinner party with my family. There were new people I have not met before and we enjoyed a fun evening together. What surprised me at the party was a big chunk of our conversation revolved around the material wealth of the couple who were sitting opposite of us. We heard about their extensive trip to Europe, their new Lexus, their child's private school in Rochester, and their plans to send their daughter to Harvard. What surprised me later is hearing them talk about their faith. They were both happy to hear that both Mike and I are ministers and they shared with us about their commitment to faith. I was surprised to see how as Christians we are very comfortable with being so materialistic. There is nothing wrong with having our needs met and living a comfortable life, but to put all of our energy in life on material wealth is in contradiction with the heart of our faith.

Another surprise came to me a couple of weeks ago when I heard an author speak about his new book. The book's title is *The Family* and the author is Jeff Sharlet. In this book, Sharlet talks about "the Family" which is basically a group of Christians who believe that they are waging spiritual war in the halls of American power and around the globe. They consider themselves the new chosen, congressmen, generals, and foreign dictators who meet in confidential cells, to pray and plan for a "leadership led by God," to be won not by force but through "quiet diplomacy." Their base is a leafy estate overlooking the Potomac in Arlington, Virginia, and Jeff Sharlet is the only journalist to have written from inside its walls. The story goes back to Abraham Vereide, an immigrant preacher who in 1935 organized a small group of businessmen sympathetic to European fascism, fusing the Far Right with his own polite but authoritarian faith. From that core, Vereide built an international network of fundamentalists who spoke the language of establishment power, a "family" that thrives to this day. In public, they host prayer breakfasts; in private they preach a gospel of "biblical capitalism," military might, and American empire. Citing Hitler, Lenin, and Mao, the Family's leader declares, "We work with power where we can, build new power where we can't." What shocked me about this book is that these Christians believe that for 2000 years Christians in general have gotten the message of the gospel wrong. They have focused on love and caring for the poor. According to the family the "real" message of the gospel is about power. It is about being chosen. They believe in the chosenness of the powerful leaders of the world and not in their moral capacities. Even if they have done wrong, they are still chosen, just like David was. What was important about David is not his good deeds. What was important about him is his being chosen by God. Once you reach a certain level of power, that's when we know that you have been chosen. God is not the God of the weak and hungry. God is the God of the powerful and chosen. This understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ is so shocking to me because I believe it contradicts the biblical witness of our faith.

In today's Bible reading from James we hear a strong and clear message about the importance and primacy of the acts of love for the followers of Christ, especially to those who are most vulnerable in society. James is a collection of teachings about the way Christians should live and behave. It is concerned with practical Christianity, with "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk." This is not just about personal piety or doing good deeds in private life. To James, the church exists to be engaged in public life! The indication of one's faith is real is action and not speech. Anybody can talk about Jesus. But true discipleship comes from action. This action is specifically about helping those who are most needy in society or as James puts it, "care for orphans and widows in their distress." The Hebrew Bible reflects particular concern for the care of "widows and orphans". They should be the particular focus of the Church's concern because God is so concerned with them (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 9:18; 68:5; 146:9), and Israel

was also commanded to be concerned as was God (Deut. 14:9; Ezek. 22:7). But we have to understand what the biblical writers meant by “widows and orphans”. In the ancient Near East from the time of Moses to the time of Jesus, Paul and James, the most vulnerable people in society were “widows and orphans”. If a husband died, the woman had nothing. She lost his estate, she had no “protector” before the Law or before the ravages of her relatives. She didn’t even have the option of marriage, because the decision to marry was made on the part of the man, not the woman. A widow was totally helpless! The same was true of orphans. Orphans had no legal and economic protection. An orphan was totally helpless in society, and only the compassionate willingness of a relative or neighbor to take that child into one’s own household could save that orphan from starvation, slavery or destitution. “Widows and orphans” was the Hebrew way of talking about anyone who was among the most vulnerable, marginalized, exploited and oppressed of that society. Yet, they had one force in their favor. They had the Law of Moses that commanded that the nation, its systems and its people be compassionate and work for justice for the “widows and orphans”. So the term didn’t just mean women whose husbands had died or children whose parents had died. It meant anyone who was vulnerable to exploitation, oppression and marginalization in Israel.

This challenge is still before us from the letter of James. It is not an easy challenge when we live in a world that believes in power and materialism as the way to happiness. The words of James have not always been welcome by Christians over the centuries. In fact, the reformer Martin Luther did not like the book of James at all and called it a “letter of straw.” Luther, like the Apostle Paul, emphasized that we are put right with God and justified by God through God’s grace, through faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law. James, on the other hand, seems to say that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. But that I believe is a misunderstanding of James’ intention. James says that all generosity and good works come from God. Yet, he believed that his message is so urgent that Christians needed to know that the way they lived is deeply connected to their faith and that caring for those who are exploited in society was not just a nice thing to do when we have time or feel generous. It is essential to our faith. For many years Christians have limited faith to being a good person and to having the right beliefs about God. James is a good guard for us when we reduce faith in Christ to personal piety. For many Christians, faith is about making sure that when they die, they will go to heaven. With the letter of James we are strongly urged to pay attention to what we do right here and right now. Many Christians in the congregations that James was addressing were wealthy Christian congregations that wanted to just believe. They did not want to go and do good for the widow and the orphan.

James’ zeal for social justice and care for the exploited in the world made a lot of people uncomfortable and many pastors avoid preaching on this text because it is not easy to deal with issues around wealth and money. But true growth in life comes most often in those times when we are uncomfortable. Caring about the poor and oppressed is at the heart of our own transformation because it helps us get closer to the heart of God. In their book, “*Archbishop Oscar Romero; Voice of the Voiceless*” Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Martin-Baro write, “Archbishop Romero encountered in the midst of the poor the pathway to belief in God. I am here speaking not so much of the good he did for the poor but rather the good the poor did for him, as far as his faith was concerned. In the first place he found in the poor that which is scandalous in the mystery of God understood in a Christian sense: in those whom history crucifies is made present the crucified God... In their faces Romero saw the disfigured countenance of God. His deep conviction can best be expressed in the sentence from the Puebla documents: “Therefore, because they are poor, God comes to their defense and loves them”. There is stated here a particular relationship between

God and the poor, a preferential relationship within the overall relationship between God and creation.”

So the challenge is before us today to ask ourselves: In what specific ways has knowing you are loved unconditionally by God changed the way you conduct your life: at home, in the wider community, at church? If our lives and congregation could be put on DVD without a “soundtrack,” what would others learn of religion and/or love by our actions alone? The freedom that God gives us comes from knowing that we are loved and that we are love. Only when we live that love we are living our true purpose, our true nature.

There is a wonderful passage in Frederick Buechner’s book, *The Alphabet of Grace*. “Feet are religious too. I say if you want to know who you are, if you are more than academically interested in that particular mystery, you could do a lot worse than look at your feet for an answer. When you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are.”

A pastor tells the story about living this challenge of faith. One Sunday she shared a story in her sermon to illustrate how our culture has us so focused on “things,” letting material things distract us from building relationships. She used as an example the practice among some Native American tribes where, if someone admired something they had, they would give that item to their admirer. The reason being they didn’t want the possession to get in the way of the relationship. The next Sunday, a congregant, Sarah, shared with the pastor how much that example had impacted her. After worship, she went to a gas station to fill up when the woman behind the cash register noted how beautiful her necklace was. It was a brightly colored, handmade necklace that Sarah had made herself and really treasured. Sarah couldn’t get the sermon illustration out of her head, and ended up giving the necklace to the cashier. Sarah shared how difficult it was to let go of her possession, but also how freeing. How are you being love? How do you walk the walk of faith? Amen.