

## “Faith You Can Trust”

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” In the spirit of Emerson, let me observe that one of my pet peeves is preachers who pepper their sermons with pet peeves, issuing whiney, grumpy, cranky rants worthy of Andy Rooney: “I don’t like that. The world has enough of that. Why don’t they keep that sort of thing to themselves?”

Nevertheless, here’s one of my (actually, *another* of my) pet peeves: authoritative-sounding pronouncements about what the Bible says about some complex issue, usually purporting to expound “the biblical view.” Why does this bother me? It’s not because I don’t care what the Bible has to say: I care very much. The Bible is our indispensable guide to faith and living. But pronouncements on “the biblical view” make me crazy because the Bible is a collection of writings in many different literary styles written by many different authors spanning a 1200 year period. The beauty of the Bible is the depth and breadth of the witness it affords regarding the relationship between God and people. It speaks with many different voices on most subjects. So any exposition of “the biblical view” must admit much more complexity than we generally hear in religious discourse in the public arena. Whenever somebody claims to have “the biblical view,” I get suspicious: duck and cover and check your wallet.

Does the Bible contradict itself? Occasionally it seems to; but I wouldn’t put it quite that way. It might be truer to say that the Bible offers complementary views that serve as a corrective to one another. The pendulum swings to one extreme, and pretty soon another voice weighs in to provide a more balanced view.

A clear case in point is found in this morning’s scripture lesson. It’s from the Epistle of James, an anonymous writing to an undefined audience at an unknown time. Traditional claims that the author is James, the brother of Jesus, seem improbable. The Greek is of a high literary style, and the argumentation is utterly unlike anything we might expect of a Galilean peasant; and the text itself does not claim to be from Jesus’ brother.

The letter is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” which sounds very Jewish; but “the twelve tribes” is an expression denoting the full

complement of God's chosen people, and was a common designation for the whole Church, which saw itself as the new Israel.

In form the letter resembles Greek moral exhortation, placing a heavy emphasis on behavior and painting a picture of how Christians should live; but the letter is lacking the sort of specific issues and personal details that would allow us to associate it with a particular time and place.

So it remains an anonymous writing to an undefined audience at an unknown time.

But James is important because it approaches head-on an issue that is tremendously important in the Christian life: the relationship between faith and works. Which matters more: what we believe, or how we behave?

You may recall that the Apostle Paul is commonly associated with one end of the rope in this tug of war. Paul says that we are "justified"—and here the image of a line of type conforming to a margin is very helpful—we are brought into line with God not by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. We call this "justification by faith" apart from works of the law. We are made right with God not by adhering to a check list of behaviors but by the gracious forgiveness that comes to us through God's saving act in Jesus Christ. Often the language of the sacrificial cult at the Jerusalem Temple is invoked to say that Christ is the "atoning sacrifice" for our sins. We are justified by our faith in him.

This theme of justification by faith was amplified during the Reformation when European reformers, particularly Martin Luther, saw it as the cornerstone of Christianity. Protestant preachers are known for emphasizing the centrality of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and asking him to come into our hearts. Sound familiar?

So, then, it's all about what we believe? Not so fast!

Along comes the Epistle of James with a different emphasis that includes the centrality of behavior, particularly acts of mercy toward those in need. Least we think James is not different, we should note that Martin Luther hated this letter and called it the "Epistle of Straw." Luther saw the difference; and so should we.

James says it as bluntly as it can be said: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (2:17) This follows a rather sarcastic but very effective argument:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (2:14-16)

The letter goes on to be even more pointed about confessions of faith as the be-all and end-all: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” (2:19) You believe? Big deal! Faith is necessary, but faith alone is not sufficient.

What truly matters, then? Is it faith or works? Yes. James argues to preserve the tension between the two. He even lays the groundwork for the argument that works support, strengthen and lead to faith.

Today’s lesson offers just a glimpse of where all this is going. It begins with the assertion that, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...” This suggests that every act of kindness actually has its origin in God. Admittedly, with our complex motivations and imperfect actions we are but faint and flickering reflections of the goodness of God. For with God, “... there is no variation or shadow due to change.” So we sang in our opening hymn: “Great is your faithfulness, O God, Creator, with you no shadow of turning we see.”<sup>1</sup> The image in the hymn is derived from the lesson.

James continues, “[God] gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of [God’s] creatures.” So far that sounds a lot like Paul: the word takes root in us; faith is a matter of trusting in the right words. But the agricultural image of “first fruits” prepares the rhetorical soil for the image of faith as something that grows within us and that is perfected as we engage in works of love. Where we get into trouble is thinking that we have arrived because of an affirmation of faith, that we have somehow come to full fruition and all we have to do is share our fully accomplished wisdom with others as though the way I save them is to get them to sound just like me.

James counsels not a noisy community of the self-righteous, but a quiet community of humility: “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” More listening, less talking, cool the heat: that’s quite an image. And then there’s this phrase, which I love: “for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” Self righteous indignation is not of God.

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<sup>1</sup> The hymn, in case you missed it, was *Great is Your Faithfulness*.

Wow! This reminds me of something Bill Coffin used to say: “If you love good you have to hate evil; but if you hate evil more than you love good, you end up a damned good hater.” How many damned good haters has Christianity produced? Too many.

We get angry as we try to defend our particular version of absolute truth; and the more we feel challenged the angrier we become. This is an instance, James suggests, in which “sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” dwells within us like a cancer. When instead the “implanted word” grows within us the result is not anger but acts of generosity and love. This happens when we welcome the implanted word with “meekness,” with genuine humility; and when we become not just hearers of the word, but doers of it. We truly appropriate God’s word of love when we talk less and act more.

“If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” The language here is direct and colorful; and it could not be clearer. We become doers of the word because that is how the word grows within us. And what kind of doing does the author have in mind? It is, “... to care for widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” “Widows and orphans” is a shorthand expression for the most vulnerable members of society. We live out our Christian faith by caring for those who cannot care for themselves. We can do this directly, by responding to emergencies with the necessities of life—we call this “charity;” or we can do it by working for justice, seeing to it that the structures of society make for a safe, healthy and abundant world for all. Both approaches are important.

Being “unstained by the world” means not taking on the coloration of society around us, not allowing the world to mark us as its own, to shape our identity and tell us who we are.

James is an epistle that resonates clearly in our time. In the realm of religion, too often insistence on a particular faith expression obscures the deeper need for faith with integrity. The louder people talk, the more people they turn off. And even worse: we are offered a kind of consumer Christianity that is completely tainted by the world, presented as a panacea for all our aches and pains, promising to make our lives easier and more materially successful. The appeal is understandable: people would like to be baptized right where they are, to have all their beliefs and values kept comfortably intact. And so churches divide along political lines of liberal and conservative; and people pick and choose a brand of Christianity that

conforms to who they already are, rather than calling them to become new creatures in Christ.

I think our Plymouth Church motto is very helpful here. We agree to differ, because like scripture itself our life together in faith is an extended conversation in which we are all served better by listening than by speaking. We don't learn much with our mouths open, or when we're prepared to accept only the echo of our own opinions. The motto calls us to embrace the opportunity to learn from those with whom we differ.

But we resolve to love because our conversation, like the Bible's conversation, has a center. While the Bible speaks with many voices on many issues, it sustains the unified view of God as the source of all that is good. We call this source of all that is good "love"; and so we resolve to love.

And while we're engaged in this conversation about love, we strive to live the faith that has been planted within us: we live the vision of love that we have. We unite to serve: and so we grow together in faith.

The prophet Micah expressed a similar sentiment. What does God require of us, but to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:6-8)

James reminds us that we are called to a faith with integrity: a faith that is growing within us, transforming us and transforming the world through acts of love. This is a faith we can live by, a faith we can trust as we agree to differ, resolve to love and unite to serve.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ  
4126 Ingersoll Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50312  
(515) 255-3149  
Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM  
Fax: 515-255-8667  
E-mail: [druhe@plymouthchurch.com](mailto:druhe@plymouthchurch.com)