

The First Presbyterian Church of Redlands

Rev. Cheryl Raine

January 26, 2020

First Reading is Jeremiah 31:31-34

¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: ***I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*** ³⁴ ***No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD;*** for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The Second Reading is James 1:19-27

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: ***let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;*** ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 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.***

²² ***But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*** ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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.

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

The Sermon is entitled *Faith in Action*

As many of you might know, I usually plan what I am preaching weeks if not months ahead of when a sermon is actually birthed and preached. But, what never ceases to amaze me is how God has a new word for me to share from the text each week. The phrase that literally jumped off the page as I sat down to write this particular sermon were these words from James, ***“Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save souls.”*** These words from James brought to mind the words God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, ***“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”*** The ways of God are already in us. They have been implanted within us, written on our very hearts. ***From the least of them to the greatest will know the implanted word that has the power to save says James and Jeremiah together.***

Could this be why James says meekness is in order? Yet, who among us welcomes anything with meekness? In our day and age, meekness is considered weakness. A meek person is perceived as being wishy washy, like limp rag or someone who is willing to go along with others without rocking the boat. It is not a person we clamor to be! As far as I could find, none of the dictionary definitions for meekness are something any of us would aspire to be, so what could James possibly have meant?

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Well, the difficult to translate Greek word (praus: 'prah-ooce') is not meekness as defined by our dictionaries. This biblical Greek word refers to a person exercising God's strength under God's direction. Someone who is meek according to James restrains his or her own power, so as to allow room for others. Another way to look at this word is its use in classical Greek, where the word refers to a horse that has been tamed and bridled. The horse is certainly still powerful, but the horse now exercises its power and abilities under the guidance and direction of the rider. If we are to be meek in this sense, then we would welcome God's guidance and direction. This is why I believe James says to us, "Be quick to listen." Be quick to listen to God's word, to follow God's lead, to align your will with the will of God.

"Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save souls," for the Good News of the Gospel impacts our whole being, our words and our actions. Yet, the implanted word of God is not a set of rules that we outwardly follow, rather it is something that changes us from the inside out. Or as Max Lucado writes, "The effects of the gospel in our lives can be seen by a continual process of inward transformation that leads to outward action that honors God." Welcoming God's implanted word with meekness is to be visible by the way in which we live and move and have our being in the world.

Do you see why I often admit that it is not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that cause me difficulty, but the parts that I do? Welcoming God's implanted word is to be visible in my life. Yet, I know I do not continually submit my will to God's will. I don't always allow God to direct my steps. If we are honest with ourselves, we all tend to do our thing and leave God out on occasion. That is why James is reminding the people to welcome with meekness God's will and way. And I suggest we can only begin to do this by being quick to listen. Quick to spend time in God's word and with the Living Word. We have to stop the incessant noise of the outer world as well as our inner chatter so that we can listen and really hear God's still small voice speaking to us.

Yet, how many of us are quick to listen to what God has to say or to anyone else for that matter? Typically, even when we are listening, we are already figuring out what we are going to say as soon as the person talking stops. We are quicker to speak, than we are to listen. Yet, it was pointed out to me years ago by a youth leader that God gave us two ears and only one mouth! He suggested that means we should listen at least twice as much as we speak!

Yes, James cautions, "Be slow to speak," because our words can deceive us. We can say one thing, yet do another. That is why James insists that we be doers of God's implanted word, and not merely hearers of the word. What we say we believe and what we do must convey the same message urges James, as words alone are not enough. Or in James language, "If any think they are religious, and their words and their actions do not align, their religion is worthless."

James suggests this alignment, of words and deeds, bears witness to the maturity of one's faith. A person of maturing faith perseveres through life's challenges, which we talked about last week, while seeking God's wisdom and aligning this wisdom with their actions. So, through this text James is asking us today whether or not our words of faith reflect what our faith looks like in action? Does what we say we believe translate into how we live each day?

Commentator Douglas Moo cautions us, saying, "Those who fail to do the word, who merely listen to the word, are guilty of a dangerous and potentially fatal self-delusion. If the

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gospel, by nature contains both saving power and summons to obedience, those who relate to only its saving side have truly not embraced the gospel.” That is, if we only pay attention to the saving – I’m good with God. We have failed to really hear the message. As our reformed confessions express, we are God’s beloved children for service as well as for salvation. It is a both and, not an either or. We can’t just rest on the truth that we are saved, for that truth summons us to live the good news. But, how do we know if our words and actions align?

Where James turns next is a telling test for all who claim to follow Christ, for he confronts a blatant disconnect between the words and actions that he has witnessed in the churches under his care. I didn’t read this part of his letter, which is the beginning of chapter two, but it’s a practical application of his message – ***“be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”***

So, let’s test ourselves with the following hypothetical church goers. Imagine you are a greeter on a Sunday morning welcoming everyone who comes to worship and we just happened to have a variety of visitors who show up. I invite you to monitor your own internal responses to the descriptions of the visitors you have the opportunity to welcome. Are you ready?

- A well-known wealthy business owner, whom you know, with a reputation for giving to non-profits
- A disheveled, dirty and pungent smelling individual from the streets
- Two young families with lively children in tow
- A group of tatted ex-convicts from a nearby halfway house
- An elderly couple walking hand in hand
- A democratic progressive politician running for office
- A republican conservative politician running for office
- A young woman covered in body art and body piercings
- The chief of police and his family
- A large family with special needs children

A statement that has been in use since the 16th century speaks to our most likely internal responses to these descriptions, “Birds of a feather flock together.” We naturally are drawn towards those who are like us and suspicious of those who are not. Which means, if we are honest with ourselves, the way we internally reacted to these hypothetical church goers probably varied. We would more naturally gravitate towards those who are most like us or maybe those who we perceive would be great new addition to our church.

James doesn’t mince words with his congregations, for he says, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

Do your words match your actions? Do our words as a church match out actions? Did Jesus say to his disciples and therefore to us, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and all your strength, and you shall love your neighbors as ourselves? And then he said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Does our faith in action demonstrate these laws of love?

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Do you remember James final words to us this morning? He wrote, ***“Keep oneself unstained by the world.”*** Friends, the way of our world is to judge, label, rank, and then either include or exclude certain people or groups. Stereotyping, labeling, bias, discrimination, prejudice and favoritism make daily headlines and infect twitter feeds. Even though the second paragraph of the United States Declaration of Independence reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all men are created equal**" we know that historically the "all... created equal" did not even apply to all men, let alone to all women and children. It didn't apply to all socio-economic levels or gender orientations. It didn't apply and we still struggle as a nation to live into the ideal expressed by these words and the law of God's love. We are stained by the culture we swim in, but James and the law of love calls us to be unstained. Do you see why words alone are not sufficient according to James?

James saw that the early church was playing favorites, for the wealthy were given preferential treatment while the poor were treated dismissively. And, friends, the church with a capital "C," which means all churches everywhere are still struggling to enact in deed the truth that God is the giver of life for all people and that every single one of us are created by God's love to be agents of love.

So, James exhorts us this morning to ***“be quick to listen”*** and to ***“welcome with meekness the implanted word... for religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.”***

Yesterday, eight of us gathered at University Methodist to participate in what is known as the Share Ministry. Churches in our community volunteer to help feed those in our midst who struggle with homelessness every Saturday of the year. Your Outreach Committee has committed to participating six Saturdays a year, on the 4th Saturday of odd months. Yesterday, we were assisted by a local restaurant, Dhat Island, for they donated the main course that fed over 40 individuals. The faith of Dhat Island's owners was visible through their very tangible actions yesterday. According to James they are doers of the word, not mere hearers. Those who gathered to help yesterday were doers of the word, not mere hearers, as we served and engaged those who came for a hot meal.

My friends, our faith is visible to others. James makes that very clear. I wonder what our faith in action, our words as well as our deeds, says about the God we claim to love? Amen.