

The Law of Liberty

James 1:17-27
Richard C. Allen
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South Glastonbury
Connecticut

When we look into a mirror, our physical selves are reflected back to us. We see our bodies and our faces just as they are. What we see is real, unless we happen to have one of those wacko carnival mirrors! Sometimes the reality we see in the mirror makes us smile; sometimes frown. But the reflection is real. This is me!

When we look into what James calls the Law of Liberty, what is reflected back is how closely our behavior mirrors our beliefs. The Law of Liberty is the Scripture. So, in reading Scripture, we are challenged to notice whether what we say we believe about love is reflected in the way we love; whether what we say we believe about caring for the neighbor is reflected in how we actually do that work of caring; whether what we say we believe about forgiving is really reflected in how we forgive when the rubber meets the road.

For James, it would be easier to never read the Bible, to never be confronted with what could be identified as a disconnect between word and deed, between professed belief and actual conduct. But James is a strong proponent of looking into Scripture, letting Scripture be the mirror that lets us peak into our own souls. What he hopes for, most of all, is that those in the Christian community be healthy and whole; that is, have a faith and a practice that are well integrated. That is James' way of understanding what it means to experience salvation.

James figured this would be the draw, the magnet for the Christian community. Outsiders would see that those Christians DO what they SAY. They PRACTICE what they PREACH.

James assumed the crowds would choose to associate with such a unique community. And he was right! The early church grew by leaps and bounds because there was an insistence on integrity, on practice mirroring belief. James is a prophet for our times. He is still calling the local churches to integrity, and to letting that basic integrity be the draw. A local church might have a whiz bang staff, might have an elevator, might have a fabulous youth group, a happening choir; but if there isn't this basic integrity of the integration of faith and practice, church growth can not be sustained.

Frankly, this is why I am glad to still be a minister here in South Glastonbury. This is a church that names its creed and sticks to it. We say we are Open and Affirming, and there is evidence we are. Heterosexual and homosexual people find an equal welcome. We say we are committed to mission, and there is testimony we are. Back from the DR, back from Habitat, back from Heifer Farm, back from South Park Inn, back from Peter's Retreat, back from gleaning sweet corn, the stories abound! We say we are committed to hospitality, and I keep hearing from strangers who attend funerals here, saying the hospitality they experience at the reception or in the worship is unlike any other. I tell you: this is a church family that strives every day to do that sacred work of integrating faith and practice.

We spent two weeks this August out in Wausau, Wisconsin. One day, I walked into the center of town to purchase something at the local menswear store. Of course, I struck up a conversation with the salesman. I got a new belt and he got an earful of grandfather talk. After the transaction at the cash register, I found my way to a bench not far from the shop where I sat down and continued my reading of Crime and Punishment. After ten minutes, the sales guy came out of the store, walked along, saw me, stopped, and said, "You've found the most comfortable seat in Wausau." I said I agreed.

He said, “The only improvement would be a cup of fresh coffee.” I said I agreed. He went about his business. About thirty minutes later, he came out of his menswear store carrying a cup of hot coffee, just the way I like it, un-doctored with milk or sugar. He said, “Brewed it myself!” Then, he walked away. I sat there sipping the best coffee I’d had in a long time, thinking, he could have just said, ‘have a nice day’, but no...he carried it to the next step; he MADE it a nice day!

That’s what James was trying to say! It’s nice to say to someone, ‘peace be with you.’ James would have us take the next step by figuring out what action we could take that would make peace more of a reality in that person’s life!

It’s nice to say to a shivering someone on a cold winter day, “Be warm!” James would have us consider what we could do to knit that person a sweater or fill his oil tank with fuel or maybe provide some wool socks.

It’s nice to say I wish there were more we could do for those troops coming home from Afghanistan. James would nudge us and not let us rest until we had found a way to help a veteran find a job or afford a therapist or maybe even build a house such as the one built recently on Addison Road!

I like James. I like the way he invites us to peer into the Law of Liberty, the Scripture, in the same way we would peer into a mirror, such that we might locate within ourselves the disconnects between creed and practice, between belief and action, between faith and conduct. I like the way James envisions a healthy community where everyone lives with basic integrity, integrating what we know in our hearts with what we do with our hands.

This is how James was speaking to me these past few days. I wanted to share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen!