

Riverside United Church
01 September, 2024
Offered by - Jeannie Taylor, LLWL

Scripture Reading:

James 1:17-27

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.

18In 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.

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

21Therefore 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.

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

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

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

25But 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.

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

27Religion 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.

Payer

Holy One, source of truth and light.

Pour out on us the Spirit of truth, wisdom and understanding.

So that our hearts and minds may be opened.

Amen

Reflection: "Living Letters of the Word" Jeannie Taylor, LLWL

In the epistle that Roger just read, James said "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves".

Six years ago, my former partner and I travelled with two minister friends, James Murray and Christine Johnson, to the Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina. Wild Goose is a gathering of progressive Christians, peace activists and environmentalists with music, art, worship, discussion panels and great speakers. There were inspirational worship services, serious discussions about topics such as how organized religion became co-opted by power and politics, and fun events such as the nightly "Beer and Hymns", and the Liquid Liturgy that used only music written by Bob Dylan.

One of the speakers was Shane Claiborne, an American author, preacher and peace activist. Shane is a member of a movement called "the Red-Letter Christians", which refers to the fact that in some Bibles the words of Jesus are printed in red. The Red-Letter Christians are dedicated to living out Jesus' values of love and mercy, especially the words he used in the Sermon on the Mount.

In his book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Shane talks about being a student at a Christian College in Illinois and searching for real Christians, who were living out the call of discipleship to bring about the Kin-dom of God. His quest led him to meet Mother Theresa and spend a summer in Calcutta with the Missionaries of Charity, living in a hostel and working in a home for the dying and destitute, ministering to people with leprosy.

At the end of that summer, Shane says, "The lepers had shown me a glimpse of what God might have had in mind for the world. I remember praying in the leper colony each morning "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". And perhaps for the first time, those were no longer empty words that I hoped would come true someday. They became words that, we are not only to expect to come true but also to enact. Such an idea was foreign to me in the materialism of my land, but it was so close to what I saw in the early church: a people on the margins giving birth to another way of living, a new community marked by interdependence and sacrificial love."

When he returned to the USA, Shane felt called to a Ministry of living out Jesus' radical, counter-cultural teachings, by living and working in the inner city of Philadelphia. Shane and 5 friends moved to a little row house in the ghetto in January 1997 and started a community called "The Simple Way". Their vision was to love God, love people and follow Jesus. They shared food and clothing with folks who needed it, helped kids with their homework in their living room, and planted gardens in abandoned lots. They also renovated abandoned houses to make them livable and affordable. Shane and his followers are doers of the word. Their ministry has changed over the years, but the Simple Way Intentional Community is still based in inner city Philadelphia.

Shane says he believes in miracles, and in the power of kindness to change people's hearts and minds. At Wild Goose, he told us a story that still resonates with me, because of the rising tide of gun violence we hear about on the nightly news.

He said that in the City of Philadelphia, there is a shooting on average every 6 hours. Shane and his followers decided to hold a daily peaceful protest outside of one of the gun shops in a neighbourhood where there had been many shootings. They held signs calling for a ban on semi-automatic weapons, prayed and sang hymns. They were neither obnoxious nor confrontational. They would greet the owner of the store every day and let him know they were praying for him.

Now it happened after a few weeks that the gun store owner suffered a heart attack and ended up in hospital. Shane and his congregation, including the mother of a victim of gun violence, took turns visiting him and praying for him until he recovered. When he came out of hospital, he decided to close down his gun shop. Prayer and presence can make a difference.

As we discussed in the theme conversation, the epistle of James is a letter of advice addressed to the Christian diaspora, the twelve tribes scattered among nations. This epistle is much less conversational than the letters of Paul and reads more like Proverbs in some ways. But the advice he gives is still relevant today.

James' first directive is to "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for anger does not produce God's righteousness." In other words, if your mouth is open, you're not learning anything. So, we should be inquisitive, and not jump in too quickly with our opinion. And especially, we should not reply quickly in anger, because we may say something hurtful, and anger seldom, if ever, resolves a conflict. And then there is that familiar passage, "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves".

As a worship leader, it is easy for me to stand here and say how we should behave as Christians, but being a doer is different. On a good day, I am kind and a good listener, but I confess that there are many times I do not follow through on my own good intentions.

Thankfully, as a Community of Faith, we can hold each other accountable. When we establish our missions and goals, and work together, we can achieve great things. Riverside has been a key partner in getting the Brookfield Community Food Cupboard up and running, and congregation members have contributed meaningfully to food sovereignty by donating food, time and cash to both BCFC and the Heron Emergency Food Cupboard over the years.

Other ministries of Riverside United Church include refugee sponsorship and support of our global partnership with the Providence Methodist Church in Jamaica, and your annual Write-4-Rights campaign in support of Amnesty International. As we move into the fall, other activities are starting up, such as the Riverside Seniors group, Quilting and Crafting, and Messy Church, which welcome people from the community to an open, friendly and non-judgmental space. These are some of the acts of faith that matter, that make this community of faith doers and not merely hearers.

James reminds us that being a "doer" means focussing on the "perfect law", which many biblical scholars believe is a reference to Jesus' great commandment - to love God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . and to love your neighbor as yourself." And in case we need to know what that actually looks like, James tells us to "care for orphans and widows in their distress." Doing is actively caring for the vulnerable.

No matter what religious belief people profess, if their acts do not reflect the mercy and compassion of God, "their religion," James proclaims, "is worthless."

American author, Patrick Ness, said, "You do not write your life with words, you write it with actions. What you think is not important. It is only important what you do."

James says God chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. So let us be Living Letters of the Word, to bring about God's graciousness and love in the world.

May it be so.

Amen.