

Message and Scripture 15 September 2024

Scripture: James 2:15-17 The Message

¹⁴⁻¹⁷ Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: The Economic Community

James is always a fun book of the Bible to read. James is categorized as one of the pastoral epistles and is traditionally thought to have been written by the brother of Jesus, the leader of the church in Jerusalem. And here James says what Wesley echoed in his sermon about money and what the Pope has written and talked about during his time as the head of the church in Rome – if you see a need, do something about it!

Wesley believed in economic justice. He felt debtors' prisons were unfair. He disliked the indentured servant and slave trade. Incarcerating people just because they are poor is unjust and unchristian. And yet, the idea that the rich are somehow especially blessed by God – that the rich have God's favor – is an idea that just won't die. Hints of it are even found in the Scriptures.

The entire story of Job is based upon the faulty idea that riches are blessing from God and if you lose everything and become poor and sick, you must have sinned. No matter how many times in the Bible God tells people, no commands people, to give to the poor, to take care of the vulnerable people in society, we still somehow believe and push the lie that if someone is poor it's their own fault.

This entire way of thinking can be summed up as the prosperity gospel. Our social principles pull no punches on this issue it states, "We reject religious teachings that view the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God's favor and poverty as a sign of God's disfavor." (p.16) Of course, the reverse is also true, being rich doesn't mean you have God's disfavor, but it does mean you have been given more responsibility. At the end of the parable about being good stewards of the riches God has given to you Jesus says, "from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." (Luke 2:48b) Wesley said it with his three rules about money, earn all you can to save all you can so you can give all you can. Now there are some people who live this out and impress me. One of my colleagues in ministry taught me about tithing. He said, "Write the check for your tithe first – if you wait until the end of the month, somehow the money will no longer be there." But what impressed me about this colleague is that I know that every year or so he increased his percentage of giving – I believe he gave almost a third of his income away when I knew him, and he still says he doesn't miss it. That kind of faith is powerful. He really – like Wesley – puts his money where his mouth is. And while I don't appreciate all JK Rowling's beliefs, I do appreciate the amount of money she gives away. She gave away enough money to leave the list of the wealthiest people. Why? Because she says she remembers how soul-destroying poverty was.

Poverty can be soul destroying. As United Methodists we believe in the dignity of all work – not merely as a means of subsistence – but as a way to contribute to the common good. All work. This includes all those jobs no one wants to do but still need to get done. My grandfather worked as a janitor. That was the job he

retired from. It was a poverty line job – working poor. Did that make my grandfather a person of less worth than my other grandfather who was a professor? One worked with his hands and back, the other worked with his mind. Was one somehow better than the other because of their job and their economic potential? All work has dignity and no one should be ill-treated or looked down upon because of their job.

What does this mean? Well, it means we need to treat everyone with kindness. To respect the hard work of the waitstaff and fast-food workers. We should respect the hard work of the transient agricultural help. They do hard work for little pay and little respect. We tend to look down on those who are in the service industry until we need them to keep the world running during a world-wide pandemic. I remember a mother coming to me with real fear, because her daughter worked at a fast-food restaurant, she was an essential worker. She had to go into work and risk getting Covid before there was a vaccine. Do you remember when we cheered on all those essential workers whose jobs we overlooked and undervalued? It is amazing how you can make someone's day by just thanking them for doing their job – especially when things are frustrating.

I love the interpretation of Genesis chapter two which shows us what God our creator believes we need to be healthy and whole – to experience shalom. When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, they were given the basics of food and water and shelter – and eventually clothing, but they were also given boundaries and work. They were to till the garden – to care for it. Yes, my gardening friends, gardening *or farming* was the first job given by God to humans – weeding is a divine occupation. But no one can work 24/7 and remain healthy. As United Methodists we support all workers being guaranteed fair and equitable compensation, also known as a living wage. We support measures that limit the length of both the workday and the workweek. (p. 18)

And unsurprisingly, we support the gift of Sabbath rest. God worked for six days and rested for the seventh. As United Methodists we affirm the importance of taking time away from work to rest and renew the mind, body, and spirit. I tell you; I am torn by the loss of the blue laws. The laws that closed down most businesses on Sunday. I am torn because on the one hand, it is wrong to force my Christian religion on others, but on the other hand, without these laws, businesses have taken advantage of workers, and some people have no day away from work. Some states are working on laws that give people the right to disconnect from work. The right to not answer emails, texts, or phone calls from work when they are not on the clock. I've already read about CEO's who are pushing back – saying they would fire anyone who didn't answer their communications. They are claiming that they need to be able to intrude in their workers' lives no matter what day or time. I hope we can all see how wrong this attitude is – how dangerous it is to the health and well-being of a person to be on call 24/7/365. To never truly have Sabbath.

Economic justice is about more than giving to those less fortunate. Our Social principles remind us God has entrusted us to work toward the establishment of just, equitable, and sustainable economies that work for all people around the world. This means we who have so much need to really work on how we treat the rest of the world. Do we really need a closet full of clothes? It wasn't too many years ago – if my viewing of Little House on the Prairie is historically accurate - when having more than two changes of clothes was a luxury. And now I hear about landfills in poor countries that are just mountains of unwanted clothing. I'm not trying to make anyone feel guilty, mainly I am looking into my own closet and wincing at all the clothes I own. And so much cheap clothing is produced by impoverished people, even children, in other countries who don't have any other choices.

Again, I must ask, so what do we do? As United Methodists we believe that corporations and businesses are like all other human institutions, and they should be responsible for more than producing profits for their shareholders. Corporations and businesses should promote the social and economic health and welfare of

society around the world and in their own backyards. As United Methodists we call on corporations and businesses to place people above profits, and as people we are called upon to invest our personal resources in those corporations and businesses wisely. As it has been said before, a rising tide lifts all of our boats – no one needs to be left behind if we focus on making the world better for everyone. Because as James said, “Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”