

August 30, 2009
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27

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Be Love

These words, didactic and tedious in most translations, become meaningful and almost lyrical in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. Bear with me while I take a minute and reread them for you: First, from the translation I most frequently rely on, *The New Revised Standard*; the one you have in the pews.

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. In 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.

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

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

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

Then from *The Message* again:

Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.

Put this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. *Act* on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.

Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

I'm not rereading these as an exercise in translation, but because the contrast makes it easy to understand a major part of the message here: we should live our lives in such an honorable, caring, straightforward manner that people who meet us can trust that what they see is what they get. There is no glorious, magical, instantly transformative

word here, only an affirmation of everyday faithfulness, and a recognition that what we do speaks so loudly that often others can't hear what we say. There is also a warning that when we become too full of ourselves, there is no room for God's grace to take root in our lives.

But we already know all that already, don't we? A scripture lesson like this one can make us feel like twelve-year-olds getting the same lecture from Mom or Dad that we've heard a thousand times. Yeah, yeah, we want to say, I know it by heart; get it over with so I can go back to something more interesting and something that seems more relevant to my life.

So why didn't Beth skip it, and go on to a more exciting scripture? Probably partly because if I feel like a kid getting a lecture, maybe there's a reason for it, maybe there's something here I need to listen to. And partly because something in it did catch my attention. My life, and your life, and our lives together, are the means by which God shows the world two things: what God's love is, and what the church is. We comprise the continuing life of Jesus Christ on this earth, in this place. When as church members are called ministers and representatives of Jesus Christ, it's because that's exactly how God sees us and also how the world sees us. We do get judged by a higher standard than those who do not claim to be people of faith and followers of Jesus Christ.

Understanding this, but still not satisfied that the passage deserves an entire sermon, I went back and began to read the little letter of James from the beginning. This lection had caught me and caused me to wrestle with it, as Jacob wrestled with the angel. And suddenly I realized that this is not so much a lecture as a pep talk. This letter is written to people who are being provoked. It's likely an early letter, for a church or churches in the region of Palestine who are feeling the pain of the Roman war on the Jewish people and the strain of growing division between Christians and their Jewish brothers and sisters.

I am sure you have noticed that people under stress are often not very attractive.

When we are under stress, we quite often are not on our best behavior. We say things we don't mean. We get angry with very little provocation. We walk past friends without a hello. And, believe it or not, we sometimes get self-righteous; justifying our own positions and our own unpleasant behavior beyond reason. Or, I don't know about you, but I know that's what I do. Rarely. Or occasionally.

Recently, I was talking with someone who was being plagued by the behavior of an ex-spouse. Next to your own children, I know of no one who can provoke a person as effectively as an ex-spouse. After I listened for a while to a torrent of frustration, anxiety and anger, after the person to whom I was listening ran out of steam and paused for breath, I said, "You know what? You need to forget about your ex for a minute and think what you are doing to yourself, your blood pressure, and your children. Remember the Serenity Prayer.

In another recent conversation, someone was expressing discouragement with the results of his congregation's work in their community. His attitude, and I think the attitude of many in that congregation, had begun to turn to, "Who cares about those people, anyway?" My response there was, God does, and you do, too, only you are just tired, and frustrated because the approach you have used, into which you have all poured your time and resources, hasn't shown visible results yet. So let's do some evaluation, and possible looking at other avenues. And remember, if you don't seem to care about "those people", they won't care about you, either.

We all get stressed, we all get discouraged, yet we are blessed to have a community of faith and God's love to enlighten us.

So let us today look at the letter from James one more time. It's filled with affirmations that God gives good gifts, cascading from heaven to us; that God loves us beyond measure, even showing us off as God's special garden, and that everyday faithfulness and integrity in wrestling with difficult situations (as I have had to wrestle with this scripture) is sometimes the only way to yield results. If there are things in your life to be wrestled with, consider it not to be a test coming from God, but a moment when God stands beside you, knowing you at your best and at your worst, and loves and

strengthens you. Be faithful, remember justice and compassion, reach out to others, and love one another as Christ has loved you.

Here's the Serenity Prayer as Reinhold Niebuhr wrote it.

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next. Amen