

Text: James 1: 19-27
Title: The Back of the Napkin
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Will Campbell writes in Brother to a Dragonfly that a friend badgered him for a succinct definition of Christianity. He didn't want anything long, fancy or complex. He wanted bullet points; he wanted boilerplate; he wanted sound bite. So, he told Campbell, "Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what's the Christian message?"

Will Campbell responded:

We're all scoundrels (bastards), but God loves us anyway.

To which his friend replied, "If you want to try again, you have two words left."

Campbell actually used a word with more bite than scoundrels, but the pulpit doesn't seem the place for such salty language.

So, what would you say?

If you had to boil it down, what would you say?

What would you write on the back of the napkin?

In ten words or less what's the heart of the Christian faith?

There is something in us that likes a pithy proclamation. Simple, concise, memorable, accessible. Just the essentials. Something we can hold on to, put on a poster, and wear on a shirt. I think that's why we gravitate toward favorite verses:

For God so loved the world....

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God....

The Lord is my shepherd...

Or, my personal favorite, chiseled into my father's tombstone, Titus 2:11, New English Version:

For the grace of God has dawned up the world with healing for all mankind...

There are those lines that get right to the heart of it; and that's precisely the trouble with the book of James....

James reads like a rambling list of rules.

There is much of it that seems disjointed and tangential. Jesus is barely mentioned. There is no word of the cross or the resurrection. And, "works" appears to be elevated above "grace" and that cuts against the grain of the gospels and the letters of Peter, Paul, and John. If there is a central target of Christianity at best James seems to be an outer ring.

There is substantial historical precedent for this take on James. In 1522 Martin Luther released a German translation of the New Testament with prefatory comments for each book. His concern about James was that it didn't proclaim Christ "who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us sin, death, and hell...." For Luther anything that didn't proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ wasn't apostolic. It could be helpful but it wasn't essential. Compared to other books in the New Testament Luther calls James "straw."

Listen to Luther:

James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works. Besides, he throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper.... He mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all scripture. He tries to accomplish by harping on the law what the apostles accomplish by stimulating people to love.

So, what are we to make of James?

Why traipse after something that is out in the hinterlands and not at the heart?

We've got busy lives, why bother with the fringe and not the bull's eye?

Well, in part, because there's an earthy practicality to James. While it may be rooted in the mystery of Jesus there is something tangible and present tense about James. There's a certain bluntness.

James feels like a locker room pep talk from a crusty old coach who barks out a colorful turn of phrase. James calls us forward ~

there is little time for dithering or dawdling,

there is little patience for contemplation or consternation,

there is little room for theological musing or ethereal spirituality.

James demands engagement with the real, rough, and rank world.

So, dear friends, for our purposes, let's read James as a "guide for grateful living." Let's read it as "how then shall we live?" Let's read it as exhortation and evidence of what it means to live "in Christ" or walk "in the Spirit." And, let's begin this way....

In my early twenties I worked on a dairy farm. At four in the morning and four in the afternoon I was in the milking parlor hosing off the teats of heavy-cow-udders. After we were done milking, by shovel, hose and little tractor I would clean out the cow's holding pens. I would load the "honey wagon" with cow dung and then drive that wagon around the fields flinging cow feces far and wide to fertilize God's good earth. Then we would go get something to eat....

What I vividly remember is the cow mess that was all over my boots, in my hair, under my fingernails, and on my coveralls. And so, before eating I would do the best I could to hose off and step out of what I was wearing. I did the best I could shed the offending clothes.

When James writes:

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

He is writing of a similar process. The word that he uses has the sense of taking off clothes or shedding the offending garments. And James sees the world as a place of deep and damning dung.

So, in response to the grace of God dawning upon the world with healing for all humanity ~ hose off the mess, step out of the muck, and let the Word that has been planted in you grow and flourish, until that great day of salvation when God will put this world to rights.

Now. For many that kind of piety is the essence of what it means to be a Christian. The world is a dark and dank place; keep yourself unstained for the return of Christ. But...

But, there's got to be more to it than that. Otherwise my relatives that are hiding in a Christian bubble are right and I'm in deep deep trouble.

James follows up with this counter balance.

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 from the world.

That's more than ten words, but that's not a bad take. You could fit that on the back of a napkin.

“Widow and orphan” is biblical code for all who are neglected, marginalized, poor, oppressed, lost, lonely and left behind. As they are valued and included there is something pure and acceptable to God. Wherever the widow and the orphan are remembered, there religion is alive and vital and on target. It's not an add-on or a merit badge or a field trip; it's the heart of the matter.

As David Lose puts it:

Sunday is not the pinnacle of the Christian week but is actually intended to serve and support our lives the rest of the week. Sunday, that is, is the day we are immersed again in the Word, have our sins forgiven, receive guidance and encouragement, hear again the good news of God's goodness and mercy, and are called, commissioned, and sent once more into the world to work with God for the health of the people God has put all around us.

James captures this wonderful tension between being in the world to care for the widow and the orphan, and yet remaining unsullied by the sludge of a messy world. He doesn't trade one for the other. He holds them both up.

I don't know how we live in and engage this world without getting some stink on us. And, I don't know how we live in this culture without some of the dominant values (materialism, individualism, militarism, racism, etc) staining us. I don't know how you wade into the world to love God and neighbor without getting your boots dirty, but that seems to the heart of the matter for James.

Look. All religion comes to us in cultural clothes. Every church, every brand of faith, every strain of spirituality is encased in language, customs, habits, and ways of being. And, therefore, every religion sets up different boundaries for what's acceptable, what's holy, what's right, what's unstained....

One church will read scripture and tell you that women can't teach or lead with spiritual authority. To do so is to be polluted by the ways of the world. Another church will read scripture and tell you that to look after the "widow and the orphan" means being welcoming and affirming to LGBT community. One church forbids strong drink while the Elders of another church gather at the local watering hole after most every meeting....

How we love others and keep from being polluted is often an expression of the culture pool in which swim. I know the wreckage that affairs, alcohol, addictions, and adultery cause. (And that's just the "A's.") Is that the result of being polluted by the world? I know churches whose deepest impulse is be right theologically and morally and spiritually and to root out anyone who doesn't agree with their take on things. And I have friends who pastor churches where loving the widow and the orphan is the highest good and worrying about being soiled by the world is restrictive and antiquated and ridiculous.....

You get my point? (I'm not sure I do....)

Offering sharp edged guard-rails about where and how to wade into the world to love God and neighbor is often a matter of culture.

I usually feel too dirty for the church and too clean for the world. I don't fit anywhere.

Dear friends, the heart of Christianity for James, in ten words or less: Look after the orphan and the widow; keep unstained.

May it be so with us, wherever it is that God calls us.

This week in schools and hospitals, in AA meetings and committee meetings, in courtroom and council room, in political process and policy decisions, in saloon and nursing home....

This week, wherever it is that you are: Look after the orphan and the widow and keep unstained.

Even so, Come Lord Jesus.

Amen.

Note: I am indebted to the Christian Century article "The Gospel in Seven Words" by David Heim for the opening story and image.

