

Word Implanted, Deed Cultivated

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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James 1:17-27 and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Let us pray.

O God of mercy and of peace, we pray for the people of Haiti. We pray for all recovering from Hurricane Henri and now experiencing Hurricane Ida. We pray for all who continue to face realities of COVID-19. And we hold before you the peoples of Afghanistan, and U.S. service members and families who grieve.

Be living bread. Be healing and wholeness. Be open arms. Be peace. Turn our hearts and minds. Open our eyes. Strengthen our hearts. Hold all in your unfailing love. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few weeks ago, masked and socially distanced, children of the church gathered for Vacation Bible School. We called it Camp Compassion, and focused on compassion for self, compassion for others, compassion for the world. Special thanks to Amy Raphael for her leadership, and to a fantastic team of leaders who shared their time and energy. It was a terrific experience. A little Bible, a little yoga, a little music and some fun activities, including a flower arranging workshop that was fabulous. You can find pictures of all of this on our Facebook pages.

On Thursday evening we headed to our box gardens out front, to think both about compassion for the created world and also compassion for those who may be hungry. Bill Toffey led the kids beautifully and had them harvesting and planting and getting their hands dirty and thinking, for a bit, anyway, about where their food came from. They picked carrots and beans and peppers and kale and a big, unidentified white thing that no one could recognize...parsnips. Kids took these things home to eat, though I don't really know how many parsnips were consumed, to be honest.

My job was highly important – I was the seed distributor. Kids would prepare little holes in the ground with fingers and sticks and come to me, hands outstretched, for seeds. If one seed was good, they figured, then 40 is even better. Not bad logic, but we were taught that just one, or a few, would do the trick. Our task will be to check over the fall to see how our crop is doing, and to continue to consider compassion for the world, for others, and to see how seeds transform into healthy nourishment for our bodies and the bodies of our hungry neighbors.

Over time, theologians have contested the letter of James' place in the Bible, in part because of the verses we just heard – "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." Martin Luther

famously thought James to be “an epistle of straw,” that is, barely good for feeding the farm animals. Luther thought that James was making the case that you earn God’s favor somehow by doing things, saying things. “Works righteousness,” it is called, as opposed to salvation by faith through grace alone. Our tradition is clearly not a works righteousness tradition, even though we often act that way.

I am glad that James made the cut because I don’t think that’s what James is saying. I think that James is saying that we respond to the word through service, through acts of justice and mercy and compassion. Thankfully, Thomas Long writes, the debate has changed. In Luther’s day, the need was to lift up the broad and sweeping themes of *sola fidei* – faith alone – and radical grace. But now, Long writes, “James’s very ability to hold a magnifying glass to the ethics of everyday life—his capacity to urge us toward such deeds as providing a blessing in the exchanges of daily conversation, making peace in close and sometimes strained personal relationships, caring ‘for widows and orphans in their distress’ as a life well worth living, seeking in family and vocation to live in such gentle ways that we reap a ‘harvest of righteousness’—comes as a deep and cooling refreshment.”

I agree. Grace rocks. Grace rules. But works, acts of compassion, service, demonstrate our deep gratitude to a gracious God who loves us unconditionally and who also calls us to love our neighbor.

One of our growing edges coming out of the twin pandemics of COVID and racism is just that – compassion. How we share our gifts of time and talent and money to support, to be in solidarity, with those in need. That will include backpacks and food donations, but it must include deeper dives as well. We don’t prepare meals, we don’t hang drywall for Habitat, to earn God’s favor. Such activity doesn’t save us. Such activity is the way we thank God for God’s blessings, grateful response to God’s gracious activity, by caring for the people and the world that God loves so much.

If the way be clear, we will focus with some intentionality on Matthew 25 over this coming year. Jesus’ followers asked him when did they see him, and he replies that they saw him in the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the naked, the grieving. We care for those in need for this reason – to respond with gratitude, not to earn favor. James is saying that.

You may have heard of something called the prosperity gospel, where TV evangelists encourage followers to give, to plant, a seed in the form of money donated, and that they will be blessed financially in the process. I shake my head every time I see it on TV. A corollary of that thinking allows for pastors of those churches to live lavish lifestyles – jets, mansions – as evidences of God’s blessings. As much as I can joke about seeking a lifestyle of the rich and famous, I cannot understand any of that that. You will never hear me say – ever – that planting a seed of \$1 will yield a harvest of \$20, and that such harvest is a sign of God’s blessing, for you or for me. You will hear me say what James says today, that “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above,” that is, that God blesses giving.

Plant seeds, yes. But James continues, saying that we, you and I, are evidences of that giving. We are the bounty. We are the harvest. We are the seed that produces carrots, or parsnips, even, in the forms of acts of grace and love and hope and compassion.

And before James reminds us that we live out the beliefs of our faith by acting out the word in our living, and that God blesses that, James reminds us that the word has been “implanted” in us, with the power to save us. That’s where all this seed business comes together. Welcome with meekness the implanted word. The word is the seed. We are the soil.

And the metaphor gets a little heightened because unlike the soil, which seems to be a passive participant in this drama, receiving only, we are active as well as recipients, the cultivators, through prayer, through study, through community, even through service. But God plants the word in us, and through God’s very grace makes growth happen. And the prosperity that growth promotes is never monetary, and never, really, at the end of the day, even us, but the acts of compassion themselves, and the world and the people about which and whom God cares so much.

On an anniversary weekend when we remember the coming of Hurricane Katrina, even as the Gulf Coast now prepares for Hurricane Ida, I recalled all of the church trips taken for hurricane relief and recovery. You all will have similar stories. And whether you tutor, or build a house, or prepare a meal, what you know is that whatever energy, commitment, expertise you bring is met and multiplied a thousand times over, that you receive much more than ever you can give. You know that. Seeds of faith implanted in us will blossom and grow and flourish, and will produce an extraordinary harvest.

Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock write that for “faith to be meaningful rather than empty (it) must have the integrity of word and work.” (*The People’s New Testament Commentary*, page 716)

It’s not that we do good works to be saved. Grace does that. God does that. At the same time, work flows from word, blossoms and blooms, and in order for us to live out the Gospel, we must nurture the Gospel that is planted within us, that without water and sunshine and the best kind of nutrients, we will die on the vine, or die even before the seed cracks open just a little. What we think and hear leads to what we do, and faith has integrity as it takes root and is cultivated and grows.

A few weeks back, we took a long drive through farm country, and witnessed once again the mystery and miracle of how this all works. I do not even begin to understand it, but I know that a small seed yields a delicious apple, or a fabulous blueberry, or a fantastic ear of corn, made all the better by a little butter and salt. That is faith, and we are the harvest, in how we act, in how we love, in how we share, with integrity, with joy and hope. Amen.