

24 September 2017

## Intentional Ministry

James 1:22-27

The Book of James, according to tradition, was written by Jesus' brother James, son of Mary and Joseph. Though James had not been one of Jesus' disciples – in fact, at one point he apparently doubted Jesus' sanity – he became a leader of the Jerusalem church after Jesus' resurrection. His book is perhaps the most practical of the epistles. We read chapter 1, verses 22-27.

*<sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>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.*

*<sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>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.*

Last week, as we explore the purpose (or purposes) of the church, we talked about the core purpose of “worship.” This is an essential part of who we are. But one problem has always plagued the worshipping community: the idea that worship is the *only* purpose of the church. That is, that attendance at your faith community's regular service of worship is all that God could possibly ask of us. In Old Testament times, the way this came out was in the idea that if you went to the temple at the required feasts, made the correct sacrifices, brought the correct offerings of grain or wine or whatever you produced, paid your vows, and sang a psalm or two with the church musicians you were good to go, and that was all God cared about. Let's hear how the Old Testament prophets responded to this idea, first from Micah, chapter 6.

*<sup>6</sup> 'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old?*

*<sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'*

*<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)*

Or how about this one, from Amos, chapter 5?

*<sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*<sup>22</sup> Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.*

<sup>23</sup> *Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*  
<sup>24</sup> *But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-27)*

Oh, let's do one more, just to show this isn't a fluke, from Isaiah 1 this time.

<sup>12</sup> *When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?  
Trample my courts no more;*  
<sup>13</sup> *bringing offerings is futile;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—  
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.*  
<sup>14</sup> *Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.*  
<sup>15</sup> *When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.*  
<sup>16</sup> *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,  
learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:12-17)*

Briefly, the prophets aren't interested in worship unless it is accompanied by "righteousness" and "justice" and "mercy," which seems to be about caring for the oppressed and the vulnerable in society. So that's the context in which we should hear the words of James that we just read. "Do not be hearers of the word; be doers. Act on your faith. You want to know what religion boiled down to its essence is? *To care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

And this has always been a core purpose of the Church. In the days of the early church, mercy was what set Christians apart. At that time, when abortion was rare and even more dangerous than childbirth, the normal thing to do with unwanted babies was to "expose" them after they were born. That meant "leave them in the streets to die." Christians became known throughout the ancient world as the people who picked up exposed children and took them in. When a plague swept through Carthage in 252, and every who could fled the city it was Christians who stayed to care for the sick. At that same time, the church in Rome was supporting 1,500 widows and orphans. In the Dark Ages, the only care for the poor was through the Church, and monasteries and convents were the only places where people cared for the indigent sick. Monks trained in medicine and treated everyone, as a part of their vows of hospitality, which is where we get the word "hospital." Yes, we invented the concept. Caring for those who have no one else to care for them is part of the Christian DNA and remains a core purpose of the Church.

How are we doing today? It's . . . shall we say, spotty? We haven't forgotten to care for the vulnerable, but in our prosperous middle class churches we've had a disturbing tendency to outsource our compassion. Often we just raise money to give to someone else who will do the

grubby work of ministry, or we have a small group of committed and generally exhausted church members who do ministry to the marginalized on behalf of the church – a pattern sometimes called “representative ministry.” Now do not misunderstand me: neither of these are wrong. You will do more good by giving money to UMCOR for hurricane relief than catching a plane to San Juan to help in person. And we need those committed deacons and servants as examples in our midst. But somehow giving money to charity or applauding the efforts of a few doesn’t quite feel like what James was talking about.

The fact is, ministry to the vulnerable just hasn’t been a priority for many churches. In his book *Church Refugees*, sociologist Josh Packard studies people who have once been very active in church but who have left the Church entirely. In the book he tells the story of Katie, an artist and licensed therapist, who was a member of a church in an urban neighborhood that was in transition. Once a solid, middle class neighborhood, it had gotten a little run down, had old houses divided into apartments, and had seen a wave of immigrants moving in. The church had maintained its own tradition – by which I mean its whiteness – but was surrounded by a multicultural world. Katie saw that there were children filling the streets every day after school, playing soccer and knocking around until their parents came home, and she had an idea for an after-school art program, which she would run and direct. Her church was the ideal location. It had lots of unused rooms. She took her proposal to the church council which considered it with all the speed for which church councils are famous and decided, No. Partly this was because of the possible wear and tear on the building, but mostly it was because most of these immigrant children were from Muslim families, and the council just didn’t see how doing this would bring in any new members. It would be a lot of inconvenience without any benefit to the church.

Sometimes I could swear. But there’s a happy ending, sort of. Katie left the church, found another location, started her program, and now has six employees, serves dozens of children and youth every week, and has won numerous awards for community service. Meanwhile her former church has retained its uncluttered facilities and faithful irrelevance.

This Sunday is Disabilities Awareness Sunday. On this day we remember that we are to care for the vulnerable, accept the marginalized, protect those without other protectors, and open our space and hearts to everyone. This is our version of that monastic vow of hospitality. I’ve given our Missions Team and Church Council a challenge to begin one new ministry this year, one that benefits someone *other* than us, and I’d love your ideas – from the orange insert in your bulletin.

But me telling you we ought to minister to the vulnerable is all very well. It’s far better to hear from someone who knows what that means.

*Address by Colleen Bates,  
available on the sermon podcast at [lakestreetumc.org/sermons](http://lakestreetumc.org/sermons).*

One more story. I told you about Katie’s former church in the run-down urban neighborhood. Well, let’s go to much more run-down neighborhood, in Christchurch, New Zealand. This formerly working class neighborhood hadn’t just gotten run down; it had gotten seedy. In fact, it was the red light district. And in the middle of the pimps and sex workers was a

little Anglican parish church. Just a small congregation of grey-haired faithful surrounded by a sea of squalor. One morning, the body of a dead prostitute was found in the front yard of the church. The police came and made inquiries, but no one knew any next of kin, anyone. There certainly wasn't anyone interested in paying for a funeral. So the rector said, "We'll do the funeral." So they did, and they opened their doors that day to welcome a lot of people who had never dreamed of entering. And then they kept those doors open. That church became a sanctuary in the truest sense of the term: a safe place in a dangerous world, a place where prostitutes of every race and gender could go and know they were welcome and have a cup of tea. Because it's New Zealand.

One day the priest of this parish attended a clergy gathering and told his colleagues what had happened to his church. One of them asked the inevitable question: "But are you *growing*?" The priest replied, "Yes, all of us are growing." Amen.