

Text: James 1: 17-27; Mark 7:1-23
Title: Generosity is a two Way Street

Date: August 30, 2009

Di you catch this on the news last week? Comedian Sundra Croonquist is being sued by her mother in law for telling mother in law jokes in stage? Am I the only one who thought that this would make a good joke- or even worse, wonder what Thanksgiving was like at their house? But come to think of if, isn't it sad that it had to come to this- you would think a simple conversation would have done the trick rather than have the lawyers fight it out. There has to be a better way to live.

And that is what the book of James is all about. James isn't really concerned with making any grand theological statements, and he is not writing to fix anyone's problem. No, James is more concerned with Torah- not in a legal sense, but in a moral sense. For James the intent of the Torah is best summed up with Leviticus 19:18 *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.* There is a basic tension in how we perceive we are to relate to God. One side of the tension states that God is holy, and we must do all that we can to be pure so that we may even approach him. This approach focuses on moral and ritual purity. The other approach sees us as conduits of God's blessings to others. That the way we are used by God is one of the primary ways we check up on our relationship to God.

This is why James starts with generosity. Do we assume a perception of scarcity? That our resources are limited and finite, consisting of what we can bring to hand? Or do we have an attitude of abundance; assuming that God's resources are abundant and limitless? This is the flip side of the tension we are talking about. If I assume scarcity, then I am looking first to what I have to bring to the table, and that focuses attention on me. if I assume that God give me resources in order to be a blessing to others- that puts the focus first on God. James is an unabashed blessings to others kind of a guy.

Assuming that God uses us for His purposes, James takes us by the hand. this truth forces us to look at our own lives. we cannot share what we do not have. We have been given the truth that our lives will be transformed from the inside out by the Holy

Spirit according to the promises of the Gospel. We already have the ability to be quick to listen and slow to anger. Anger leads no one to righteousness. No kidding, I went to one of those town meeting on healthcare. It was obvious that most did not come to share or to listen, most were there to spout off. (Politics is largely the art of compromise- when we assume that the other guy has nefarious motivations- cooperation and compromise is impossible.) By avoiding anger we open ourselves up to experience righteousness- we become more and more God's people!

By telling us to be doers of the word James leads us back to Torah. The purpose of the Law is not to make us ritually pure, but to help us live as God's people. James goes so far as to label those who claim to love God but who seek out conflict are delusional for they do not have the Father's love in their hearts. The litmus test for our Christian maturity is how do we share God's love and resources with those who have no resources. What we do trumps what we say any day of the week.

In the mark passage, Jesus returns to tension between ritual purity and right living. The immediate backdrop to this is the feeding of the 5000. As you can imagine. This generated a lot of news- and a lot of opposition. Since Galilee was a center for Phariseism, it no surprise that the local opposition comes from the Pharisees. What is surprising is that Jerusalem sends lawyers- the scribes were expert in interpreting Torah. Together their job is to discredit Jesus before things get out of hand.

They see their opportunity in the disciples' not washing their hands. The issue is not cleanliness. One of the cornerstones of the Pharisees approach to the Torah was the notion that God is holy and we are not; therefore in order to approach God we must first be ritually pure. (the same approach is in Islam) – and meticulously cleaning anything to do with food is a big part of that. Since EVERYBODY knows that – by publically pointing out that Jesus' disciples are getting this basic thing wrong, reflecting Jesus' teachings- then Jesus must really be off.

The normal way you would pick a theological fight is to challenge and then wait for the answer- but Jesus isn't playing by their rules. They challenge Jesus and Jesus comes right back at them. Not only does he use Isaiah to call them hypocrites- he puts their beloved Law in the realm of human tradition and takes it outside of divine intervention. Playing off Commandment # 5 Honor your Father and Mother (do you

think that any Pharisee or Scribe would be willing to call the 10 Commandments anything less than God's law?) Jesus contrasts what the law clearly implies with what they are actually doing.

Honoring Mom and Dad in those pre pension and pre Social Security days meant that you supported them in their old age- turning them out into the street would be beyond dishonoring them. Again – the Scribes and Pharisees offer no objections. Jesus then points out the practice of declaring something corban- as far as we can tell corban had something to do with payment of vows. I promise to pay the temple if God comes through for me on such a such a challenge. Since this was payment to God it was non-negotiable. Can you imagine this approach with our stewardship pledges? Oh well- this chapter scotches that.... What Jesus wound up doing was pointing out that their human tradition was actually breaking Mosaic law! No wonder, a few chapters down the line that the Pharisees and authorities in Jerusalem decided that Jesus had to go. After they left with their tails between their legs, Jesus gathers the crowd AGAIN- and points out that the notion that links what we eat to holiness is fundamentally flawed.

Later with his disciples Jesus makes plain which side of the tension he falls on. Ritual purity as such is an impossibility- for no matter how we cook our food or clean our bodies- those activities have nothing to do with the human heart. Mark makes a big deal about declaring all food clean. I have no idea why he fixates on food- maybe he was hungry guy. What Jesus is really doing is throwing our ALL of the Kosher laws- condemning them as missing the point. This, by the way, was one of the reasons that Jesus had no problems with lepers or the woman with a hemorrhage- both classes that would be declared unclean by the kosher laws.

Which brings us back to where we started, weighing the tension between competing notions of how we approach God? One side of the tension stated that God is holy and we must so all that we can to be pure so that we can approach Him. What Jesus did was throw out a ritual approach. notice anything about the things Jesus lists that make us unholy; evil intentions, avarice, theft, murder, slander, etc? they are not moral bogeymen lurking around the corner waiting to pounce on us unawares. They are things we must choose to engage in- therefore we can choose not to engage in them.

James and Jesus are making the same point. What is inside us is made plain by our actions. If we embrace our status as the people of God, we will more and more see ourselves as conduits of God's blessings to a world that needs all the help that it can get. We need to be very clear- we embrace generous living not as a way to get close to God; but as a result of our relationship to God based on God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Generosity really is a two way street- we think of it in terms of sharing all that we have been given. The more we have, the more we share sort of thing. But generosity is also an affirmation of God's grace, that because we are already God's people in Christ, we are able to ever more act like and experience being God's people.

But there is still that obstacle. Do we see the world through our own perception of limited resources or through the eyes of God's abundance? I challenge each of us this week to be generous. That will look different depending what situations we will find ourselves in. For some, generosity will be lending an listening ear; or being even more eager to forgive. Others may be generous with their time, or find themselves in a position where they can encourage someone who desperately needs a pat on the back. Still others it will mean springing for a cup of coffee, or spending an extra bit of time with another person. Whatever it may look like let us take both Jesus and James up on their challenge to be doers of the word- and God's blessing to all that we meet.