

JAMES 2: “WHERE THE HECK IS JESUS?”

(07/04/10)

Scripture Lesson: James 2:1-26

For our Sunday morning reflections the first six weeks of the summer we are doing a sort of Bible study of the New Testament Book of James. We will read one chapter of this pastoral letter every week. I will provide some general information about the letter and its author. Then we will focus on two or three passages or themes in the chapter that teach us something about what it means to be a Christian.

I know it is not a good idea to start a Bible study by criticizing the book we are studying or the author, but I am going to do it anyway. It might help explain why I rarely preach on the pastoral letters or actually any part of the Bible other than the gospels.

I hope I won't be tipping my hand if I tell you that the title of my communion meditation this morning is “Where the Heck is Jesus?”

This past week I saw a bumper sticker that I like. Some bumper stickers, as you know are better than others. I have always liked: “honk if you hate noise pollution.” Among the plethora of religious bumper stickers, I have grown a little tired of: “my boss is a Jewish carpenter.” I prefer: “after the rapture occurs, can I have your car?”

The bumper sticker that articulates the central theme of our communion service this morning reads: “Christianity: It's Not a Religion, It's a Relationship.”

First let me go back to the matter of the authorship of the Letter of James. As I mentioned last week, the author's identity is unknown. He simply gives his name as “James.” It is clear that he is a Christian and a person with authority in the early church.

There are three people named James in the New Testament, any one of whom could have been the author of this letter. I can't wait to tell you the brilliant insight I had this week regarding the author and the content of this letter. This brilliant insight, I should hasten to add, is not shared by biblical scholars.

The first of the three people named James is the disciple James, the son of Zebedee. We know he was one of the first four disciples to be called and that he was a fisherman. The second James is another disciple referred to only in a listing of the disciples. This James is referred to as “James the just, the less, or the little.” I don't think either of these disciples is the person who wrote this letter.

My choice for the author is the James who was the brother of Jesus. I am not alone in holding this preference; biblical scholars are generally, though not universally, inclined toward this option. This James, who was not one of Jesus' disciples, went on to become one of the leaders of the early church and the head of the church in Jerusalem.

Many people are unaware that Jesus had brothers and sisters and that his brothers are actually named. According to Mark 6 and Matthew 13, when Jesus returns to his hometown, Nazareth, with his disciples, the townspeople say,

“Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus' brothers appear to have no clue as to what Jesus is all about. Mark says that they “lack understanding.” They try to intervene when Jesus puts himself in harm's way. They think he is crazy; they describe him as being “beside himself.” At one point, in Capernaum, Jesus refuses to see them. He says, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Clearly there was no love lost between Jesus and his brothers.

It is also telling that when Jesus is on the cross he entrusts his mother not to his biological brothers but to the disciple John. He tells John, “Behold your mother,” and he tells Mary, “Behold your son.” This would have been a real slap in the face to his brothers, the oldest of which, from the way they are listed, would have been James.

Now let me return to my criticism of this letter, which was obviously written by a person of authority and leadership in the early Christian Church. In the salutation the writer describes himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In the passage we read today he indicates that showing favoritism to the rich is inconsistent with one's belief in “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” From that point on, if I am correct, he never mentions Jesus again.

This bugs me. How can you write a letter articulating a certain understanding of what it means to be a Christian without ever mentioning Jesus? Isn't this what Christianity is all about? As the bumper sticker proclaims, Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship. It is a relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't see how can you have Christianity without Jesus. Yet the creation of a belief system without Jesus is what many declared Christians appear to have done. They abstract out a theological or a moral code from Jesus' teachings that, admittedly, is helpful to them in the living of their life. But in doing so, they leave out the person of Jesus. They may include him as an historical figure whose death on the cross saves them from their sins, but they have no personal relationship with him. In essence, they act as if they did not believe in his resurrection. They act as if they were unaware that Jesus is alive in them and in the world and that they can have a personal relationship with him.

Think about it. When you ask some people to tell you about their religion, to tell you what it means to be a Christian, they will tell you that their religion boils down to the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. Not bad. But where is Jesus in this?

This is why on communion Sundays, during our time of prayer I invite us to sit quietly and talk to Jesus. I think the most important part of Christianity is not that Jesus lived but that he lives. The more we deepen our relationship with him through prayer, through common everyday conversation with him, the more our lives will be changed. We will begin to take on his mind and his heart. We will begin to see both ourselves and others through his eyes.

Now let me share my brilliant insight. Why does James make almost no reference to his brother in this letter? His letter is little more than a collection of moral directives like "be kind to orphans and widows," "don't show favoritism to the rich," and "watch your mouth." This is all good stuff. However, James leaves out the most important part of what it means to be a Christian, a close personal relationship with Jesus. Speaking purely as a psychologist now, I suspect a hint of sibling rivalry. James takes the heart of his brother's teaching and leaves his brother out. Think about it.

If we truly believe in the resurrection, if we truly believe that Jesus returned to his disciples after his death, we will realize that he lives, that he is alive both within us and among us. We can walk with him. We can talk with him. We can bring our cares and concerns to him. We can bring to him those parts of ourselves that are weak and in need of strengthening, that are twisted and in need of straightening, that are broken and in need of healing. We can bring our moral and ethical dilemmas to him. We can ask him for help in our relationships, perhaps especially our relationships with those whom we love.

Look what happens when we don't do this. A recent issue of *Time* magazine contains an article about a Mexican drug cartel whose leader, Nazario Moreno, is a self-proclaimed evangelical fundamentalist Christian. His 1,500 minions hold prayer meetings every day before they go to work. Their work, of course, is the distribution of drugs throughout the United States. They not only kill the *federales*, the law enforcement officers, they behead the officers and place their heads on stakes in the center of the city.

I don't know what kind of Christianity we are talking about here, but I am quite sure that, no matter how much Nazario Moreno knows about the Bible and how cleverly he can rationalize these decapitations, Jesus would not approve.

Do you wonder whether you should be more patient with your wife, your husband, your children, or your elderly parents? Talk to Jesus about it. See how Jesus feels about them, feels toward them. Ask Jesus how he would like you to feel and act toward them. Try to take on his mind and his heart in these relationships.

Are you hurting inside from the death of a loved one? Talk to Jesus about it. It just might restore your faith in a life after death and open you up to the continued presence of your loved one in this life, in the here and now.

Do you wonder how you should feel as a Christian about your son or daughter who has just disclosed to you his/her homosexual orientation? Don't turn to those Bible verses about how homosexuals cannot inherit the kingdom of God or to the section of the Roman Catholic catechism that declares homosexuality to be a deviant form of being and relating. Talk to Jesus about it. Let Jesus shape your response, your relationship with your son or daughter.

It is just like any other relationship. The more we talk to Jesus, the more the relationship will deepen. In some ways, however, we have an advantage in our relationship with Jesus. The more we read about what he said and did as recorded in scripture, the better we come to know him. We have access to him in prayer and worship. We also celebrate his presence in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

As we partake of this sacrament, for just a few short moments, let us be with Jesus. Let us bring our deepest needs, our deepest concerns to him. Then let us open ourselves to his guidance. Let us celebrate his presence both within us and among us. Then let us continue to both celebrate and deepen this relationship in the week to come.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
July 4, 2010*