

SERMON SERIES ON SPIRITUAL FORMATION

SERVICE AS SPIRITUAL FORMATIONPat Cameron; September 7, 2008

This morning, we conclude a four-week series focus on spiritual formation in the church—how we are shaped spiritually by the Christian community. Lois began the series with how worship is a means of spiritual formation. The following week, John talked about the possibilities for spiritual formation in the practice of hospitality. Last week, Jerry talked about the psycho-social dimensions of Christian formation. This week, I'll be sharing how service can become a means for spiritual formation in the church.

I could have chosen a number of texts that emphasize the importance of Christian service. But I decided to look at the book of James because it is well known for de-emphasizing theology and emphasizing the practical aspects of Christian living.

The traditional understanding of the author of the book of James is that James was the brother or half-brother of Jesus (half-brother because, unlike the belief that Jesus was biologically fathered by God, James was fathered by Joseph); and that he was a leader in the early church—the James that is mentioned in the book of Acts. Even though he only mentions Jesus twice in his letter, the author seems to have an implicit understanding of Jesus' teachings. There are numerous parallels between James and the gospels; especially, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. But familiarity with Jesus' teachings doesn't necessarily mean a family relationship, and some biblical scholars challenge the traditional view.

James addresses his letter to "the twelve tribes in the Diaspora." The twelve tribes refer to the twelve tribes of Israel, so the letter may have been addressed to Jewish Christians. If the book was written before the issue of whether non-Jews could become part of the Christian community, then this view may be correct; the only Christians were Jewish. On the other hand, if the book was written later, there would have been gentiles as well as Jews in the Christian community. In this case, the "twelve tribes" reference may have referred to all Christians who were not all Jewish, but were related spiritually to the tribes of Israel.

The term "Diaspora" refers specifically to the scattering of the Jews that began during the exile; after the exile, many Jews didn't return to Palestine. But the author could just have just as accurately used the term "Diaspora" to include many non-Jews who became Christians as Christianity expanded into predominantly gentile territories. (ibid).

On the surface, the book of James indicates no overt interest in debates over correct Christian doctrine, although the author is undoubtedly aware of these disputes. His tone is strident, as if he is arguing against others who believe differently.

Many who've studied the book of James have suggest that the author is challenging Paul's contention that salvation comes through faith, not through works. Its emphasis on works prevented its inclusion into the Christian scriptures long after most of other books of the New Testament had been approved. The Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, argued that James should be taken out of the Bible It was Luther's contention that James was an "epistle of straw" in its advocacy of works righteousness rather than salvation by faith alone.

But to say that James and Paul had a completely different view of the source of salvation is an exaggeration. Paul didn't say that works, as fruits of faith, are unimportant. And the author of James advocates a faith that is active, not action without faith.

The contrast between Paul and the author of James is further amplified by the different ways they understand "faith." While for Paul, faith is an act of will to accept God's promise of salvation through Christ, the author of James understands faith as belief. The author assumes Christians are believers; his concern, however, is how these beliefs translates into action. For James, having beliefs without action that backs up one's beliefs, is a dead faith.

In chapter 1, verse 17, the author states that generosity and giving are from God. In verse 19 through 21, he admonishes the Christian community to listen before talking, reject anger and all "sordidness...and wickedness," but instead to "welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

But the word that is implanted within those who claim Christ is not intended to lie dormant; it is intended to blossom into action. In verse 22, the author says, "Be doers of the word, and no merely hearers..." Hearing without doing is deceptive. According to verses 23 and 24, it is like looking in a mirror. We see what we really look like when gazing at ourselves in a mirror—but once we stop looking, we forget. (I don't know about you, but I'm often shocked about what I see, especially first thing in the morning. I want to forget!). But, according to verse 25, those who "look into the perfect law"—that is, the "law of Christ which is "the law of liberty,"—and act upon it, will be blessed.

In verse 26, the author echoes his earlier admonition that Christians should be slow of speech. He says that those who think they are religious should "bridle their tongues;" otherwise, they are deceiving their hearts, and "their religion is worthless." The author may be saying that all talk, and no action is not religion.

If so, this verse serves as an introduction to James' definition of real religion in verse 27: religion that is "pure and undefiled," is "...to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

In the Bible, the common reference to "widows and orphans," means those who were the most vulnerable members of the society. In a patriarchal society, women without men had nothing. Widows had no family support or protection. Likewise, orphans by definition had no family. They were often traded on the slave market, or abused physically and sexually. (www.jameslove.com). In the times in which the book of James was written, the church offered the only alternative available to provide family for those who had no family.

To understand the impact of this reference to widows and orphans, we can think of the people who are the most alienated--the most cut-off from our culture and too often from the church: people who are homeless, people who dread the cold of winter because they can't keep up with their heating bills, many in the gay and lesbian community, those for whom race is still a barrier to decent wages and living conditions, those who seek refuge from famine and war. The author of James is saying that being religious--having faith--means caring for the widows and orphans of our day. Faith that is not backed up by works is a dead faith.

Usually, we think of good works as outcomes of a solid background in the faith—fruits of the spirit. Being well grounded in Christian teaching, especially in understanding who Jesus was and is, leads to discipleship—people who follow Christ by putting their faith into action.

But the book of James offers a different perspective: In James, Christian service is not an expression of a faith that has already developed; rather, it is an integral part of faith-development itself. For the author of the book of James, service is so important that he *defines* true religion as service to others.

We often see service as something that individual Christians, not the whole community, engage in. A sign that was posted above the door to the sanctuary in my home church said, "We gather to worship; we scatter to serve." Though well-intentioned, this sign always bothered me.

Of course, we come together for worship. If we had no corporate worship, could we call ourselves a church? Of course, we come together for Christian education. If we didn't provide Sunday School and other settings where children and adults come together to learn about the faith, could we claim to be a responsible Christian community? Yet when it comes to service, we often leave it up to individual members who may decide or decline to engage in this dimension of the Christian faith. The perspective of the book of James is that service is not an option for Christians: rather, it is the defining characteristic of a Christian community.

In James, service is not only about what it does for those who receive it; service is more about what it means for the Christian community that engages in it. It marks the difference between religion that is "pure and undefiled" and religion that is "worthless."

In Elizabeth O'Connor's *The New Community*, one of several books she wrote about her church, the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., she writes,

The salient fact about the community we yearn for, and that calls us into wholeness, is that it cannot exist for itself. It exists only in relationship to the world. In recent years, we have awakened to the fact that the peoples of the world are largely destitute—without food and clothing and shelter, and without structures to nourish

any inward life. Unless a group of people reach beyond themselves to touch and be touched by some of this need, its members will not know community. (O'Connor:10)

The book, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* tells the story Solomon's Porch, a Christian community Minneapolis that describe itself as holistic, missional, and experimental. It discusses a number of church practices it uses for spiritual formation, including some we've discussed in this series, like worship and hospitality. Pastor Doug Pagitt tells of how Solomon's Porch sees service as formational in the life of the community. Challenged by James 1:27, he says,

We were enraptured by this call not as a way to live out our faith but as a means into our faith...the world needs people who are living religiously useful lives in and for the world. We want to be that kind of people, and we know this means making service a normal practice of our spiritual formation....Service isn't how we act out our spirituality; it's how our spirituality gets shaped. (Pagitt: 146).

The Solomon's porch community keeps asking the simple question, "Who is our neighbor?" That has led them to reach out to those who live in the immediate neighborhood of the church by offering tutoring for children, English as a Second Language for adults, and personal and job-skills development for teenagers thorough a T-shirt making project. Asking "Who is our neighbor?" has also led Solomon's Porch to sponsor an annual trip to build houses in Guatemala.

Like many of us, I grew up in a non-Mennonite church. What first drew me to the Mennonite Church a friend who connected me with Mennonite Voluntary Service. I remember him saying that in his congregation it was an expectation that young adults would give two years of their lives through one of the service avenues of the church. Service was part of his churches' culture.

I fear we're in a cultural crisis in the Mennonite Church. We haven't remained unstained by the world; in fact, there is often little difference between the culture within the church and that outside. How do we rebuild a culture of service? How can service once again help form the spiritual identity of the church?

It's a hurting world out there. There are many answers to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Any act of service done in the name of Christ is blessed by God. What we do is not nearly as important as that we do something *together* as a witness to our neighbors that we're doers of the word, not just hearers.

Service is not just about what happens in the lives of those we serve. It's also about what happens inside the church. In the book of James, service will make the religion we profess "pure and undefiled." Elizabeth O'Conner, reminds us that, through service, "...in giving of ourselves, we keep our own lives watered" (O'Connor: 14).

Service helps form the church's spiritual life, helps shape a culture that is unstained by the world, makes our religion relevant. If Mennonite Church of the servant were to hang a sign above the door to this room, I would hope that it would say something like this: "We gather to worship. *Together* we serve.