

Scriptures:

Song of Songs 2:8-13

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

More Than a Book

If you were to ask me my favourite scripture or my life motto it would come out of today's verses. James 1:27 "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."

Christians can talk a lot about what scripture says and the bible as the 'word of God' has been used and abused since it was put down in script. A book written by various authors and cultures filled with fable, story, history, poetry, memories, memoirs and more is held up as infallible, authoritative and divinely inspired by some. Others feel it has numerous excellent lessons in it while others believe every word is written to live by.

We as a United Church have a big bible sitting on our altar and we read scripture each week. Some churches stand up when the gospel is read and others hardly read scripture at all. Nick as a preacher always holds a bible in his hand while I hold a script of text. Many have scriptures on their walls of their homes while others have them written on their T-shirts.

We can hold up and memories the sacred text as much as we want. We can put it on for show to look holy and wise but if we do not put its message into practice what purpose does it truly carry? Noel Schoonmaker wrote "According to James, if we hear the word of God, or read the word of God, without putting it into action, we are deceiving ourselves. It's like looking in a mirror to find that our hair is messed up, we've got a smudge on our face, and we have little green bits of broccoli stuck in our teeth, and then walking away without doing anything about it. James' point is not about physical appearance, though; it's about the heart. The Bible is a mirror we can look into to see where our witness is messed up, to see where there's a smudge on our heart, and to see how God wants us to enact the word in the world. The Bible is not a searchlight that reveals other people's shortcomings; it's a mirror that reveals our own. It summons us to a higher level of living."¹

In my humble opinion something has gotten lost in the equation of what it means to be a Christian. For many it seems if they attend a Sunday service, can quote scripture and or know with certainty how God feels about important topics like every single abortion, every type of sexuality, when it is appropriate to drink and what constitutes a swear word then they are a follower of Christ (none of these topics does Jesus mention by the way). We are not Christians because we think we've got the bible figured out and/or we have said a prayer that means we will get into heaven. We are Christians because we have a God of grace, love and abundant welcome. It's not a certain set of rules that gets us in. Which I think is the whole point of the

¹ Noel Schoonmaker: Doers of the Word James 1:22-27 15th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

passage in Mark by the way. God longs for us to know we are loved in such a way that God longs for us to be connected. Beloved and loved the holy names us. We avoid the Song of Songs so often because it sounds like a love letter which is exactly what it is. It is poetry that shares how much God longs to be with us and show us love. Arise, my love, come away with me. Wow that is beautiful.

When we become followers of Christ - Christians we become followers of the word of God which is Jesus. John 1:14 says "the word became flesh and lived among us." "The Word of God, then, is no abstract principle; it's no theoretical notion; it is a concrete and embodied word. When the word of God became flesh in Christ, it not only spoke but also healed the sick, and touched the outcast, and cuddled children, and overturned temple furniture. Since the word became flesh and lived among us, it is the very nature of God's word to be living and active; to be not only spoken and heard, but also enacted. Therefore, we misrepresent the very nature of God's word when we hear it and don't do it, or when we talk a big game about the Bible and don't put it into practice. James is calling us to embody the word of God by doing it.²

One might start to question what rules and laws do we follow? I would suggest that Jesus breaks it down for us pretty clearly. Love God, Love neighbour, Love yourself because each one of you are beautiful created beings of the holy. If the is still confusing and you wonder who might qualify James makes it even more clear in verse 27 where he says, "pure and undefiled religion before God...[is] to care for orphans and widows in their distress." Orphans and widows were some of the most vulnerable persons in the ancient world. They represented disadvantaged demographics within society. A primary way to do the word of God, therefore, is to care for persons who are vulnerable, to love persons who are marginalized, and to help persons who are deprived.

"To every Christian that talks a big game about the Bible being authoritative, or inspired, or infallible, James might say, "What are you doing to resource the underprivileged?" To every church that stands when Scripture is read in worship, James might ask, "What are you doing to empower the oppressed?" To every family that has Bible verses on the wall of their home, James might ask, "What are you doing to support the vulnerable?" ...To every preacher who studies God's word and stands to declare it on Sundays, James might say, "What are you doing to support the dispossessed?"³ For everyone of us who holds up worship as primary and important this text is asking - how is that worship influencing the lives of those around you? Do you go to worship and then leave concerned about its lack of perfection or do you walk out the doors finding ways to show more love, grace and welcome to all you encounter?

As I read the Song of Songs today and hear about the love God has for us I can't help but wonder if we are truly followers of God then would we not love the same way. If we are to live out the love we were given our world would be transformed.

² IBID

³ IBID

Let us pray.

God of grace and mercy, we thank you for the living Word, Jesus Christ. We thank you for the word revealed in the Holy Scripture, and we ask that your Holy Spirit would help us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. In the name of the of the one who loves us beyond compare. Amen.