

From the Inclusive Language Bible

James 1: 17-27

17 every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above, descending from the Creator of the heavenly luminaries, who cannot change and is never in shadow. 18 God willingly gave birth to us with a word spoken in truth, so that we may be, as it were, the first fruits of God's creatures.

19 Remember this, my dear sisters and brothers: be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for God's justice is never served by our anger. 21 So do away with all your filth and the last vestiges of wickedness in you. Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you, because it has power to save you.

22 But act on this word—because if all you do is listen to it, you're deceiving yourselves. 23 Those who listen to God's word but don't put it into practice are like those who look into mirrors at their own faces; 24 they look at themselves, then go off and promptly forget what they looked like. 25 But those who look steadily at the perfect law of freedom and make it their habit—not listening and the forgetting, but actively putting it into practice—will be blessed in all that they do.

26 If those who don't control their tongues imagine that they are devout, they're deceiving themselves and their worship is pointless. 27 Pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of our Abba God, is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans when they are in need and keeping oneself uncontaminated by this world

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

1 The Pharisees and some of the religious scholars who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. 2 They had noticed that some of the disciples were eating with unclean hands—that is, without ritually washing them. 3 For the Pharisees, and Jewish people in general, follow the tradition of their ancestors and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow. 4 Moreover, they never eat anything from the market without first sprinkling it. There are many other traditions which have been handed down to them, such as the washing of cups and pots and dishes.

5 So these Pharisees and religious scholars asked Jesus, "Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of our ancestors, but eat their food with unclean hands?"

6 Jesus answered, "How accurately Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites when he wrote, "These people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me. 7 The worship they offer me is worthless; the doctrines they teach are only human precepts." 8 You disregard God's commandments and cling to human traditions."

14 Jesus summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand. 15 Nothing that enters us from the outside makes us impure; it is what comes out of us that makes us impure.

21 For it is from within—from our hearts—that evil intentions emerge: promiscuity, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, obscenity, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evils come from within and make us impure.

### **What kind of Christian will you be?**

**Susan Pray**

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Good morning. I am happy to be here this morning, allowing Gene a well-deserved break. He has asked that I include some of my seminary experiences and I hope I have captured some of them.

Let us pray.

May my teaching drop as the rain.... For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! Deu. 32.2-3

I have been on a journey which has led me to answer God's call and pursue authorized ministry (hopefully ordination). My journey has had many twists and starts, but I have in the past 2 years made some important decisions. I am a Member in Discernment with UCC, meaning I am recognized as pursuing authorized ministry. I am attending seminary at Chicago Theological Seminary pursuing a M. Div. with a concentration in chaplaincy. My hope is to be a chaplain (but of course I will defer to God's plan when that time comes).

I was led to Chicago Theological seminary and selected this school for 2 reasons. First, they are the only UCC seminary to offer the ability to complete all required courses for an M.Div. on line. And that was important since I am settled and don't want to move. That doesn't mean I don't go to Chicago on occasion. Because I do...there are some amazing people in my program and I enjoy our face to face interactions. And the second: the strong emphasis on social justice and inclusion. The school offers concentrations in many social justice specialties and prides itself on making leaders for these movements. The seminary attracts people from many faith traditions, ages, genders, races, geographic locations and orientations. It is truly diverse.

So that is my current place in life.

I am also decidedly UCC. I was born and raised UCC. I dabbled a bit with other denominations, but I always circled back to UCC because of what we believe. The UCC has a message of welcome, inclusion and social justice. The UCC believes in acting upon faith, quoting the verse from Galatians on their web page: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." The UCC has been the first denomination to ordain African American, first to ordain a woman, first to ordain an openly gay man, and the first to affirm the rights of same sex couples to marry. They had a prominent voice in the anti-slavery movement (side note: visit the Amistad chapel at the National Headquarters chapel). I am proud to be part of a Christian family that believes in "doing" the work of God, not just hearing or talking about it. And that is important to me.

The message of caring for others is woven throughout our Hebrew scriptures and New Testament. Our Hebrew Scriptures devote a large portion of text to the words of the prophets. The prophets were not prognosticators, predictors of the future, as some mistakenly assume. They were representatives of God's word. They preached and pleaded for the people of Israel and Judah to reform. They spoke of "justice" but not in the legal sense of punishment or redemption, but justice as "distributive". Distributive Justice is about caring for others, compassion, fairness, equity. We are called as God's people to be aware of others who are in need. We are expected to care for them.

God created us with agency: the authority, the ability to exert power, and it is God's expectation that we, humankind, the pinnacle of God's creation, will tend and care for all of creation. That means the earth, the sky, the creatures and each other. It is all part of God's creation plan.

And in our Christian faith tradition, we hear in the reading from James that our statement of our faith lies in our "doing" and caring for others. It is not just about hearing or listening. It is not just about studying or talking. And in Mark we learn that a person cannot simply demonstrate compliance with rules and doctrines and expect to have purity of heart. Faith is about more than observances of traditions and attending worship. It is about more than reading and preaching. To be consistent with the message of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus and the words of our New Testament writers, we must maintain an active, involved faith.

And this is what has attracted me to my seminary. We are called to action as Christians and in my seminary, there is an expectation that we will take our education and apply it in a way that empowers, helps others. To be activated; to carry out the expectation of God, the word of the prophets, the ideas of Jesus and James, excites me as a Christian.

***But we live in a culture of religious contradictions.***

We live in a time when health care is considered a privilege only for those who can afford it. Medications necessary to save lives are prohibitively priced only to make a greater profit. Housing for those with lower incomes is not only hard to find, but often in poor locations. And systemic racism is alive and well and living in mass incarceration and privatization of the prison system (did you know the private prisons require quotas for number of inmates sent to them? And they are meeting them even though crime rates have fallen?)

To profess my Christian faith and current journey brings some mixed responses. I am finding myself having to explain and even defend myself to other Christians who find my ideas of social justice contrary to their own beliefs and understandings. Their understanding of "who is my neighbor" falls short of my understanding of Jesus' teaching. Their willingness to help others is limited to those they deem as "worthy".

By the way.... did you know there is a UCC study done in 1987 that shows that there is (and has been for over 30 years) evidence to support that

hazardous sites are placed intentionally in areas populated by those in poverty, without a voice and least likely to offer a challenge. Yes: intentionally. And this is both within our own country and international as well. But I digress.

There are many "Christians" who advocate for (placement of hazardous waste or manufacturing sites; private prisons; limiting access to affordable health care, to name a few). There are many "Christians" who disparage those in need, suggesting they made their own way; that if only they worked harder, behaved better, prayed more loudly, pulled themselves up by bootstrap, their life would be fine. There are many "Christians" who work for greater profits instead of the greater good. There are many "Christians" whom Jesus references in our Mark reading as being "impure" because of what comes out of them: intolerance, selfishness, injustice and greed. James tells us: "If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless". There are many Christians who align with the ideas of the Pharisees: that it is more important to follow the rules and focus on the "thou shalt not's". But what about the "thou shalt's?"

Encountering these Christians has become my greatest challenge and has made my heart heavy. We are living in times when people not just in this country, but around the world, feel empowered, and even justified to proclaim hatred and violence in the name of their religion I find myself dumbstruck by the vitriol. I am shocked that anyone could truly feel hatred of another so intensely. I am saddened and fearful that many of this type have power and prominence and even celebrity and influence.

This Summer I participated in a required internship, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Cleveland Clinic Main Campus where I worked as a Chaplain, 40 hours a week, some evenings, many overnights/on-call, many weekends. The patient care experience was amazing. I ministered to people in all phases of illness, from those recovering and planning on going home, to those facing end of life. I prayed with families who were standing vigil as their love one left this world. I sat with a lonely granddaughter who was the only family member present for her dying grandmother. I was present as families discussed very difficult decisions about treatment. And I heard confessions of those who were facing a terminal diagnosis. This experience strengthened my commitment to this calling.

But a more significant part of our CPE was small group process. Part of CPE is to learn more about ourselves, who we are, how our experiences influence how we understand and respond to others. In this group we did a lot of sharing and caring.

In my group I had a young female Rabbinic student who I bonded with almost immediately. We were both genuinely interested in each other's faith traditions, but also found much commonality in our values. We also discussed challenges we have experience because of our gender. We shared our concerns for LGBTQ community; she has a transgender sibling who is finding his way; I have many friends who are somewhere in the LGBTQ arena.

The others in our group were men of more conservative faith traditions. One member was an ordained RC priest from Nigeria and another, a young man belonging to Seventh Day Adventists.

One of my goals for my program was to learn who was my "other" ...the person/people/group with whom I have the most discomfort with. Those I find the most challenging to engage. And in this group, I found them: Conservative Christian men.

I was questioned by one gentleman about my "tolerance" and acceptance of gay/lesbian men and women, not just in ministry and not just in marriage, but in their existence. This young man was firmly committed to the idea that this was a lifestyle choice and running counter to creation. And he had YouTube videos for me to watch that would prove it. Not knowing much about the Seventh Day Adventist tradition, I asked how he might minister to someone of the queer population if he does not see them as authentic or respect their truth. He had no answer.

I was challenged by the Catholic priest on my gender: why do I need to pursue ministry? Why am I not considering adopting children instead (he said this)? The women were referred to as "sweet and nice" (by 2 of the men), not as capable or knowledgeable.

The priest also commented on the fact that the women in the group were having difficulty accepting the male domination. He understood that the men were dominant and we ("the girls") were not doing a very good job accepting this.

And in those comments, I heard the Pharisees: those leaders who were more concerned about traditions and doctrines and how things always had been, instead of caring for others. And Jesus spoke to that by acknowledging the impurity that is coming of out them...not the impurity around us. It is not something that soap and water will wash away.

My response to these challenges? Well first I said, "Wow". Then I prayed: God help me not jump across the room and choke him. Then I listened. I wanted to understand how these men could profess the same Christian faith as me. How can we belong to the same club? How can some see our loving, forgiving and saving God as being capable of intolerance, cruelty and rejection?

Jesus said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me". James tells us to be doers, not just hearers. I want to differentiate myself from those other Christians. I want to have the courage to speak up and challenge, but with respect and authority. I want to have the words. But I know that challenging, debating, defending rarely changes anyone's beliefs. Yet to ignore it is to suggest condoning or acceptance.

One evening, God clarified this for me. I was at dinner with my 20 y/o nephew. We engaged in conversation about faith and he defined himself as a "former Catholic". He struggles some of the hypocrisies he has experienced in organized religion, but still regards himself as spiritual and more importantly for him: a compassionate humanist. He then went on to share his disdain for the "haters": those that oppress, those that cause harm, those that live for more profits. His statements were strong, and, in his words, I heard some of the same hatred that the other club panders. And I interrupted him to provide this feedback: that he was speaking the same hate that he was against. And it was in that moment that I realized the necessary response to my "other".

It is not to admonish, argue or debate. But instead, to be a doer. To live a life of giving and helping and demonstrating the love of Christ for humanity, even those who we don't agree with. There will always be hurtful, hateful, harmful people in this world. We must follow the words of James and be doers of the faith. The "other" Christians are counting on us leaving worship and returning to our secular life. Instead, we need to be doers of our faith every day. By our actions, words, and caring we will rise above those who spew hatred and intolerance. Jesus did not spend much time condemning

and challenging the Pharisees. Instead, he offered a quick rebuke and moved on to teach and talk about love.

I want to be involved with helping those in need. I want to respond according to my faith tradition and God's word. But I know that I need to work harder. It is not just about belonging to UCC or attending seminary. It is not just about staying in our lane but moving to places where we might not be as comfortable. It is about joyously and loudly proclaiming our faith, without shame or fear.

And that brings me back to how I responded to the men in my group. I shared with them how I want to represent the love and humanity of Jesus. I want to share with the world compassion and caring. I shared with them my experiences of inclusion and caring for people of other traditions and cultures. I reiterated my intention to open to those of other cultures and faith traditions, and not so bound by rules and doctrines that I might miss the opportunities God has given me to be "with" someone. And I extended myself to them to offer care and conversation, I offered listening in more private conversations, I offered compassion in spite of their rigid conservative ideas.

At the end of the internship, my group mate, the Seventh day Adventist, approached me and shared that he was returning to his faith community with some questions about their beliefs and intolerance of those in the gay/lesbian community. He also had begun doing some real research (not just YouTube) about LGBTQ issues. And my Nigerian priest? He is now texting me, asking how I am and wishing me well in my ministry.

I want to be a doer. I hear the words of Micah the prophet: **He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**

I want to walk humbly with God. I want to do justice. I want to make the teachings of Jesus part of my life and be an example to those I encounter. It is not easy. And I certainly have my moments. But it's a worthy goal. And I invite you along.