

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, August 19, 2017 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: James 1:19-25**  
**James 2:1-8**

**Sermon: You've Got Mail – James (3<sup>rd</sup> in the series)**

There's an old story about two Buddhist monks who were travelling home after a pilgrimage to a famous temple. The road was long, and they had been observing the abbot's instructions to practice faithfulness along the way: fasting – only eating what they needed; silence – no conversation unless it was an emergency; and abstinence – they were not to admire or to touch anyone they might be attracted to.

So far so good, until they reached a bend in the road, in a place not far from their own monastery, where there was a large boggy mud puddle. It spanned the whole road, with thick brown mud that curdled several inches deep. And on either side of the road there was only steep incline, down into the equally boggy valley, the area was all covered in mud as far as the eye could see. It was clear that there was really no way to walk around the bog.

That was all well and good for the two travelers, the abbot had said no gluttony, no talking and no sex, but surely they were allowed to get dirty. *Except that* standing at the edge of puddle, they saw a beautiful woman. She was a lovely young thing, in an expensive long silk kimono. She stood there in dismay, for she clearly did not want to ruin the beautiful robe by walking through the mud.

Without a word, Tanzen, one of the monks, stepped forward and scooped the young woman up in his arms and started making his way through the mud. Ekido, the other monk was shocked and appalled, to see his companion so clearly breaking the rules he had been taught. He hurried after his friend, all the time keeping his eyes averted so that he might not find himself staring at the beautiful young woman.

When they got to the other side, Tanzen gently deposited the young woman on a clean patch of the road, wiped his own feet and continued on, without a word. All Ekido could do was trot after his friend, berating him in silence for disobeying the abbot.

When they finally arrived home and the abbot gave them permission to speak of their journey, Ekido could not suppress his words or his anger any longer.

"You broke the rule, Tanzen," he cried, "You touched that woman when you carried her across the mud!"

"I did it to be kind," said Tanzen.

"You must punish him now," Ekido said to the abbot. "He has polluted the very purity he sought with the sacrifices of his pilgrimage, he has destroyed it all by touching a beautiful woman."

“I will not punish Tanzen,” said the abbot. “For it seems to me that Tanzen put the woman down after the danger had passed. But you, Ekido, you have carried her all the way home with your anger.”

Through many religious traditions, there are these ongoing false dichotomies – the flesh versus the spirit, the intellect versus the body, the immortal versus the mortal, and prayer versus action.

I call it a false dichotomy because it is impossible to find health or wholeness in one extreme or the other. Surely it is in balance or tension back and forth that we find faith works best, at its richest and deepest level.

Today, in my own summer pilgrimage through the minor epistles or letters found hidden at the back of the New Testament, today we are exploring the letter of James.

This letter was written in the name of one of the early church’s leaders, the same James who is often referred to in the gospels as the brother of Jesus. It is unlikely that the author of this letter was that James referred to in the gospels, because it was clearly written later, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. But I find that the spirit of that earlier James is very much present in this letter.

In the book of Acts we hear that the apostle James became head or chair of the apostles’ meeting – a gathering time where new theologies and practices of the early Christian community were being shaped, and a way forward was being chosen for the early church. As head of that meeting James often found himself caught between two extremes:

- Should Jesus’ followers be more Jewish or more Gentile?
- Would they reach out or be more exclusive?
- Should they hold everything in common, or only certain things?
- Would worship be based on preaching, or speaking in tongues, public prayer or silent meditation?
- Would their faith be mostly intellectual and abstract, or concrete and struggling for justice?

One of those debates in the early church was initiated by Paul, and is addressed in this letter, ascribed to the apostle James. In the letter to the Romans, Paul proclaimed: *A person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. 3:28.* You see, Paul was really passionate in his belief that God loves all people through freely given “grace” – because none of us are perfect, it is not possible for any of us to earn or deserve that love. There is no point in competing over who deserves it more, or what we can do to earn some eternal reward. We receive it as a gift, a gift given to all God’s children.

But some early followers distorted Paul’s teachings about grace, to say to anyone who would listen: “As long as I have faith then – it doesn’t matter what I do. I can indulge in all kinds of injustice and greediness and immorality – as long as I turn up for worship on the Sabbath – I’m ok?”

Naturally, when that extreme was practiced, the other side of the pendulum swung into action. And part of that pendulum swing was this letter ascribed to James.

Throughout history, Paul and James' theologies have often been set up in a kind of false dichotomy of their own. Martin Luther, who was a big fan of Paul's doctrine of grace, once wrote that *James was an epistle of straw that it had "nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it."*

Yet I believe that James and Paul actually had a lot in common. Both believed that real faith had to reflect Jesus' values. Both believed that life in Christ would be full of generosity, justice and compassion.

In contrast to the lack of accountability practiced by his contemporaries, James offered as his vision a life of faith that started in the heart or the head, but didn't stop there.

James preached a faith that was embodied. He, like Paul, believed that a living faith could not be contained in a list of taboos or traditions. Followers of Jesus were not afraid of their bodies but lived out their faith with their bodies. Therefore they should not be acting in a way that did not glorify God. Their actions would be inspired by Jesus' own model of compassion and love.

The letter of James, you will find, is full of real stuff. Hearts and hands/ temptation and desire; birth and death and light and darkness; anger and justice and tongues and gossip; past and future and blessings and curses.

The letter of James is a reminder that real faith is not "all in your head". We should be able to demonstrate the content of our faith by the actions and the priorities we choose.

This doesn't mean that faith in action is an express highway to some kind of eternal reward or salvation. Rather it is an affirmation of the gratitude we feel, for knowing that God loves us, in spite of our very human distortions and our false dichotomies. Rather, when a choice is to be made, we should be thoughtfully discerning God's solutions. This is what Paul and James and we hold as common ground: we are all God's beloved – grace and hope are ours. So let that be the path forward, and thanks be to God, Amen.