

## Faith and Generosity

Proper 18, Year B, RCL. James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17. The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. September 9, 2018. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)

This passage from today’s epistle contains James 2:16, the portion of Scripture that my wife and I most often quote together in certain situations. In the New Revised Standard translation it reads “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill.” Julie and I prefer an alternate translation which is wonderfully breezy and terse; it reads “Go in peace; be warm, be fed.” Whenever Julie and I encounter a situation where someone is wishing someone well without any thought to how they might actually *help* them to be well, we turn to one another and murmur, “Be warm, be fed.”

James, that crustiest of preachers, is well aware that a lot of well-wishing is conventional. It’s part of politeness, the everyday lubricant and buffer of human interaction. And rightly so; we should have it well imbedded in our everyday thinking to wish one another well. Adequate clothing, shelter and food are rock-bottom basic human necessities. Be warm, be fed. It’s what any person of good will would wish for a fellow human being. But showing good will consists in more than wishing someone well, hoping things go well for them, and saying words of blessing.

The Internet is buzzing these days with objections to the commonplace phrase, “My (or our) thoughts and prayers are with

you.” The objection is based on exactly what I’ve been saying, that it’s way too easy simply to wish people well and not do anything specific to help them. The objection is, in most cases, not against praying for them but against stopping there. Is there anything we can do for the specific people in the specific situation or, beyond that, what large issues of danger or distress might be addressed? It’s like the difference between simply (a) wishing a hungry person well; (b) giving that person a sandwich; (c) supporting the local feeding ministries; or even (d) going right after hunger on a worldwide scale, as for example the organization Bread for the World does.

And prayer should be part of the process all along. We don’t have to tell people we’re praying for them if that might come across as trivial or patronizing, but we had better be involving God in our attitude toward them and discerning just what to do.

Yes. I know. We can’t help everybody. But if we are living in a prayerful relationship with God we will know what our mission is and how to discharge it, in the big picture and in specific situations. It’s not that we ought to drop everything and respond in depth to every demand made on us; we need to be open to where God is in the situation. And James, in his lovingly acerbic letter, reminds us that God is typically on the side of showing mercy, compassion, and generosity.

James of Jerusalem, Brother of Our Lord Jesus Christ, had a nickname that Eugene Peterson renders in English as “old camel knees”—meaning he was known for spending so much time in prayer it was likely to callous his knees. That, as much as his close blood relationship to Jesus, is what gave James authority in the early Christian community. Jesus’ family, you know, was not so sure at first about Jesus’ vocation to proclaim—indeed, inaugurate—the kingdom of God. They tried to do an intervention on him at least once to bring him home and get him back under the radar of the

powers that be. But Jesus' resurrection brought them around to Jesus' way of seeing things.

It ought to bring *us* around to that, too. We are the resurrection people. We are the people turning away from sin and death, turning toward righteousness and eternal life. We are the people learning to walk with Jesus, to see and do things his way.

And the way to do that is to have a relationship with God that frames, informs, transforms, transfigures, enhances, enriches, extends and fulfills every challenge to our charity, compassion, patience, kindness and goodwill. Our resources may seem to us be short, but God's standing invitation to us is to let him into the transaction; let him add value; let him make a good difference. His resources are infinite. His lovingkindness is our model—and our goal. Can we do every little thing? No, but every little thing matters, and working the stewardship of creation in and with God is what our call in Christ is all about. That's what changes things heavenward. Including us.

The habit of lovingkindness is built by two habits. The first is the habit of prayer, and the second is like unto it: the habit of letting our relationship with God, built through prayer, color everything we think and do.

So let's check our knees. If the callouses aren't very thick yet, we might try to get another layer on before the next big challenge to our lovingkindness comes around.

❖ This sermon is a very extensive revision of the one preached at the Shared Ministry on September 9, 2012.