

Sunday October 2, 2022

Lesson 5: Sharing with the Vulnerable

Scripture: James 2:14-17; Exodus 22: 21-27

Context:

This fall we continue our series titled “Freedom.” Our second unit is titled “Justice” and looks at scriptures where God advocates for those who are vulnerable and in need. The scriptures today come from the book of Exodus in the Old Testament and the book of James in the New Testament. The focus of today’s lesson is to ponder the ways we might share with the marginalized and vulnerable members of society.

Both texts today emphasize the importance of compassion and care for the other as part of the religious experience. In Exodus, the scripture focuses on taking care of the disadvantaged, an act tied to their history. At one time, Israel was the disadvantaged one in Egypt, slaves in a foreign land.¹ Now, Israel stands on the other side as the one with the power to be master and lord force over others. However, to do so violates their own history as God’s salvific act for them was delivering them out of bondage.² Thus, the people of God are given the task of caring for others.

God makes sure the tasks given to them are not nebulous though. They are given concrete actions such as not treating immigrants or the disadvantaged badly. If God hears the cry of those they oppress, God will once again play the role of deliverer and God’s chosen people will be forced to remember their own history with the shoes on the other feet.³ This will then lead to a cycle where those they love will be placed in vulnerable positions.

The other tasks are straightforward. They are not to charge interest on debt. They are meant to return items given for security deposits. They are to think about what people possess and how God will hear them if they cry out in pain or distress.

From the writer of James, this conversation of the disadvantaged carries on to the early church. Having faith is not a talisman for one’s spiritual well-being. If people truly are of faith, there is a tie to a conviction of taking care of others, of seeing compassion as part of growing in holiness.

Dead faith occurs when one blinds oneself to the well-being of those around them. The first example James uses is of a Christian greeting a poor individual and giving wishes for good health and ignoring their physical needs.⁴ If one’s faith is alive, one should see how God leads us to see those around us and how we might be in community with them. The faithful Christian will wonder what the ways by which God draws us together.

¹ Fretheim, Terence E. “Exodus.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 247.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 248.

⁴ Perkins, Pheme. “First and Second Peter, James, and Jude.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 113.

Application

One of the most beautiful gifts Christians receive is the gift of faith. While there are of course certain people who receive this as a primary spiritual gift, all Christians are given faith to trust in God and experience an assurance we cannot readily see or explain. And it comes to us without price; no matter where you might find yourself on the socio-economic ladder, faith is a gift to cling and hold onto.

For Christians though, as free as faith may be, it does not leave us there as simply a gift to receive from God. Because of the faith we have in God, we are transformed to see possibilities we would not see on our own. Faith allows us to trust an unknown future to a known God. As a result, God invites us to see how our faith in the Lord transforms how we view our journey and how we view others.

I like how today's lesson comes from both the Old Testament and the New Testament as it demonstrates how much God cares about seeing our faith come alive in daily living. From the book of Exodus, we learn how being a people faith invites the Israelite community to view the stranger and how to interact in their business conversations together. Even as they wandered around in the desert and then settled into the Promised Land, the people needed tools and a connection for how their faith was to connect them to others.

In the same breath, the church to which James writes needs to know the Christian journey is not just about feeling good about believing in Jesus. Yes, it is wonderful to have assurance of one's faith in Christ; and yet what is the response to such a gift? No one can earn their salvation as God is not focused on what humans can achieve or do. God is interested though in how the living Jesus comes into our lives and challenges the Christian community on how we live with each other. What does it mean for the Christian community of James to welcome someone to worship with them and when blessing them, not give anything for their dietary or community needs? Christians are called to be compassionate and seek to address the needs of the vulnerable.

I have come to find from studying church history, the times when the church seems to miss the mark comes when we forget to think about the vulnerable among us. Instead, we focus on church politics or using the name of God to persecute or hurt others. During those times, we forget to look to those around us to see where needs are not being met and how the spiritual well-being is malnourished when people do not have their physical or emotional needs met. It is when the church seeks to pacify internal disputes, we lose sight of these words from both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The church is at its best when we ask the questions of how we might serve and care for those in our midst instead of focusing on ourselves. Both scriptures today invite the people of faith to consider how they are meeting the needs of those in their community whether it is via hospitality or making sure they have physical nourishment. The people of God are given counsel on how their faith should help them to see what God might be inviting them to share or give to those around them.

I recently had the privilege to be a part of a meeting where this was the focus of a church group. We of course had focused on the stewardship matters of the church and passed reports for denominational requirements. Yet there was a moment where we could share what God was doing in a ministry focused on feeding those in need and giving others resources. The energy in the room shifted as people shared and spoke of how it was connecting them to the community and other churches. Even amid inflation and the return from pandemic upheavals, God is still at work to remind a people of faith of the gift of compassion. The room was alive, and we could connect the dots on how God was inviting us to seek how we might come alive in our faith.

My prayer for churches in the coming years and all my days of ministry is we might be focused on being alive in the faith. When we are focused on being a part of our community and especially concentrating on the most vulnerable, God uses our faith as something beyond a personal talisman for our ticket for where we go when we die. Instead, God takes our faith and demonstrate the power of the Savior who came so all who thirst, and hunger might be nourished. God transforms our faith into a gift which will lead others to know of the goodness of God, who is for the marginalized and the vulnerable.

Why does God want us to think about faith as something living? Who are the marginalized or vulnerable in your community or church? What are ways you can stay focused on taking care of those in need? How does God transform our actions and gifts for others? What does alive faith look like in comparison to dead faith?

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