

“Judged by the Law of Liberty” – Jas 2:1-17 – Sept 6, 2009

Well, I did it to myself again. At the beginning of the week, before the pressure had really started to build in a week full of pressures, I was all fresh, and keen, and eager to do good. In this almost euphoric state of naivety I looked at the suggested readings for this week, and thought perhaps I should preach on the text from James. Why? Not sure ... it was, I think, a mixture of feeling like some of you may have thought I dissed the letter of James a bit in the scripture intros last week and wanting to do something a bit fresh, a bit new, in preaching.

And so it was that I decided to preach on the reading from James. In looking at the text, there was a strange phrase that caught my eye ... as I like to put it, it's a bit like catching your hand on a sliver on an otherwise smooth railing. The phrase? It's verse 12 ... “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.” The ‘law of liberty’? That's kind of a strange juxtaposition of terms, isn't it? ‘Law’ and ‘liberty’ are two concepts that don't immediately come to mind as being tied together; in fact they seem contradictory in many ways. And so I thought we might explore this a bit further.

Not that it's easy to preach from this letter attributed to an unknown James. There's precious little in there relating directly to Jesus. Most of the letter seems to be moralizing of some kind or another – great material for a good ole' -fashioned pulpit thumping barn-burner of a sermon that attempts to whip the obedient faithful even more into line. Most Christians summarize the letter in five words – “faith without works is dead” – surely you've heard that quoted, and probably even connect it with the letter of James. But there's not a lot of material here that seems to echo grace, and forgiveness, mercy, and justice.

At least, that's what I thought until I tripped on the key phrase, “law of liberty.” There it sits, sandwiched between a passage that starts off berating the people for showing favouritism and a passage that winds up potentially condemning their faith. You may recall in the opening part of our reading we have a memorable scene that shows a rich man receiving preferential treatment, being ushered to a prime seat in the synagogue. The incident reminded me of attending church in Hamilton this Sprint while I was at General Assembly. I went to an old downtown church, complete with two sets of massive doors I had to pull open, but more notably with the little doors on the ends of the pews. I guess I was tagged as not being rich or powerful, as I had to find my own way down one of the two side aisles, and then try to figure out on my own how these little doors could be opened! I didn't notice a “standing room only” area where the poor were ushered like in the opening part of our text. In fairness, however, the author of our reading clearly condemns that kind of preferential treatment and sides firmly with the poor. He (we assume rightly or wrongly that all the New Testament authors are male) roundly condemns such actions drawing upon the second half of Jesus' new commandment, namely to “love your neighbour as yourself.”

It seems that such discrimination against the poor was actually happening in the early church. For example in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we hear him condemning those who “humiliate those who have nothing” referring to a practice of those who had lots of food digging in an pigging out, leaving the “have-nots” looking on longingly. Where Paul then was referring to food, sadly today we can see in some congregations the same thing happening with love and fellowship, where the popular are swarmed and the not-so-attractive ignored.

The other half of the bun that sandwiches the key phrase “law of liberty” is the closing part of the reading that concludes with the almost universally-known “faith without works is dead.” This declaration is often quoted by enthusiasts in arguments pitted against Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, urging the “chosen frozen” to understand that belief alone is not enough.

With a poignant example of dismissing the poor the reader is urged to recognize that to the hungry in rags a warm greeting and a hollow prayer simply will not do.

In between these two social criticisms and prodding of the faithful lies that curious and enigmatic reference to the “law of liberty.” What law is that? Can you in fact legislate the kind of freedom referred to here? Some Old Testament laws come to mind as perhaps being relevant, among them the injunctions concerning the forgiveness of debts in Jubilee years, or the release of slaves under certain conditions. But it seems that the author here has something deeper, something more foundational in mind.

I did a bit of digging in the Greek to see if there was something in the words used that might provide a clue. The word used for ‘law’ is ‘nomos’ which does have a variety of meanings. In a broad sense it means law, but also means principle or norm. We hear the word in English today as a suffix, as in ‘astronomy’ – the law or science of stars, ‘agronomy’ – the definitions of farming. Sometimes the word nomos refers to any kind of law, but in New Testament writings more often refers to the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament, and even to scripture itself.

On the other hand, the word ἐλευθερία (hegenteria) has in some sense a more restrictive meaning, referring to liberty or freedom. But what do we mean by the terms liberty or freedom? Most commonly in North America we think of political freedom, but if we stop to think about it for a moment I believe we can recognize other forms of bondage from which we might be freed. In the current global economic meltdown North Americans have been introduced to understanding economic slavery in new terms. Where before debts such as mortgages seemed mere nuisances, now they are seen as massive ball-and-chain anchors dragging people under water, so to speak. It seems also that more and more people are finding a need to find freedom from the bondage of addictions – alcohol and drugs being the most widely talked about, but internet and related addictions are rapidly rising as well.

But the bondage that I am coming more and more to understand as even more pervasive and perhaps the kind of entrapment to which the author was referring in the letter of James is the sense of entitlement, the belief that one deserves to be treated in preferential ways. This is the base belief that displays as attitude, as a demanding not only of rights but of privileges. And the sad fact is that such demanding traps and enslaves both the demander and those around them. Those who feel this sense of entitlement – “I deserve it!” – are trapped into uncaring, unloving, ungracious modes of behaviour. Others are trapped into submissive behaviour, toadying to receive the financial scraps that drop from the tables of the rich or being forced to watch from a distance obnoxious overconsumption, or worse yet be enslaved to sustain such odious behaviour.

The only thing that can break such co-dependant behaviour and free all who are trapped by it is, as the author points out here in James, gracious behaviour that exemplifies the principle of freedom, the law of liberty. Grace is the antithesis, the opposite, the cure for self-centered, self-focused, self-loving behaviour. Grace is the surrendering of self for the good of others, and in the process discovering true freedom – freedom from the enslaving chains of self, of ambition and desire and greed and manipulation. Grace is the means of freeing others from subservience, the granting of dignity, the practice of justice. Grace is the taking a seat other than the seat of honour, the giving not in expectation of return, the compassion and love of a cup of cold water to the thirsty, a loaf of bread to the hungry, warm clothes to those in rags, and comfort to the grieving and lonely. It should be clear by now that the ‘law of liberty’ is none other than the principle of grace, the norm of justice and compassion.

And so we come to understand that in the letter of James, a work so often used to bully people, to rant about 'proper' behaviour, to misplace stress on correctness, in this document is placed this little gem of true understanding of the grace, mercy, and justice to which we are called in the name of Christ. Once again, as in all of the New Testament, we are reminded of the love of God made manifest in Christ, the grace of reconciliation offered so freely to us in Christ, and the call to us to respond to that grace and mercy through loving God in return, and loving our neighbour as we ourselves have been loved in Christ.