

Grace and Works... or “Old Camel Knees”

James 1:17–27

September 1, 2024

The Epistle of James is most famous for its claim, “Faith without works is dead.” Our reading this morning from the opening chapter foreshadowed this idea with the notion of “hearers and doers” of the Word. James asks us to take an honest look in the mirror and practice what we preach.

But as I look out over this congregation and our culture in general, I know that we are already doing a lot. The past week, the surgeon general declared that the declining mental health of parents constitutes a public health crisis primarily because we are under so much stress from doing so much. Likewise, experts have been pointing for years to the stress that’s on children, youth, and young adults, including college students. Retirees increasingly have to navigate a vast and complicated healthcare system within the context of a society that is rapidly changing under the influence of technology. Again, that’s a lot. And the sandwich generation are those who are stretched between caring for elderly parents on the one hand and adult children on the other. Add a full-time job and some grand babies to the mix, and—my Lord—that’s doing a lot of a lot!

So, I don’t wish for this sermon to devolve into a lecture, which often happens with James and his strident calls to faith and works. For all of the doers, I want you to hear the theology of grace that underpins James: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” The Bible reflects the worldview of its time, including the idea of a two-story universe: heaven on top and the earth below. Today, we have a vastly different understanding of the universe.

Yet, however we might conceptualize what is above and beyond, the theological point is grace. God, who is outside of creation, gives to our world generously and abundantly.

I learned this week that the indigenous tribes of Hawaii have more than 200 words for rain. They have different words to describe the intensity and duration of rainfall, and also the various kinds of rain that make sounds upon leaves, smells in the air, and even the ways that rain feels upon your skin. This culture is giving attention to the gifts from above. What impact would such attention make in our busy, stressful lives?

Amy Leach has written a memoir about growing up a Seventh-Day Adventist. When she was a girl, she was taught to watch the sky for a cloud that would grow bigger and brighter until it revealed Jesus riding on top with all his trumpet-blowing angels. This Jesus would call his faithful followers to him, then destroy everyone and everything else. Eventually, Leach turned away from this faith, but she gained a new perspective. She started giving attention to all the clouds, whether wispy, fluffy, or pink. There should be 200 words for clouds!

Leach writes that she never saw Jesus arriving on a cloud. But she never saw Jesus walking away from her either. He promised, “I am with you always.”

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” Then, James adds, “There is no shadow or turning in thee,” which is the line that inspired the hymn “Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.”

James does call us to live our faith, specifically by helping the orphans and widows. This phrase is the same as Jesus naming “the least of these” as people in need of assistance. There are indeed things for us to do.

Yet, if we understand that God is a faithful giver, then we can act not out of fear or guilt but out of gratitude and praise.

I dedicated my opening poem to the deacons of Mount Zion—men and women who inspire me with their faith. This congregation is the oldest historically Black church in Chatham County, dating all the way back to the Civil War. They welcome us every month for fellowship and worship. And I’ve noticed that they often say, “God is good all the time.” This does not mean that good things happen all the time or that one should pretend to ignore the bad problems. Individuals have been through a great deal of adversity—personal experiences of racism as well as systemic racism in our country. Yet, despite all this, they say, “God is good all the time.” It is a statement of God’s faithfulness and an inspiration to do good works.

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” Just who was this James who wrote these words long ago? Scholars disagree. For one thing, James was a common name in the Bible.

But from the third century, the ancients came to associate the author of this letter with James the Just, one of the most influential leaders of the early church in Jerusalem. Legend has it that James spent so much time on his knees in prayer that his knees became hardened like those of a camel!

That’s a lot of a lot, and perhaps you are already feeling too overwhelmed to do much more. I want us to be active in helping our larger community. And I want us to be motivated out of grace, not compulsion, so that instead of feeling overwhelmed with one more thing to do, we might find community—a family of faith among different generations and races. So, let me lay these words of Mary Oliver along Old Camel Knees.

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Friends, do what you can out of gratitude for what you have and who you are—a member of the beloved family of God. Amen.

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