

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17) – Year B – August 30, 2009**  
**Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2,7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

A shrewd observer and commentator of sociological concepts and realities, the author George Orwell proclaims in his book, *Animal Farm*, “We are all equal, but some are more equal than others”. In the story, the farm animals have staged a coup and removed the human farmers from their superior and oppressive position. The *ideal* to be implemented is that all the animals will now be treated with the equality, dignity and respect that were evidently absent under the farmers’ regime. The *reality* is that some of the animals begin to find ways to dominate the other, and the old hierarchical model of inequality begins to loom large once again, destroying the ideal.

Today’s lesson from the letter of James, begins with this statement, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” As one theologian says, James is written with a Greek view of God and the universe, combined with a Jewish view of the Law. We see this immediately in the unusual reference to God as being the “Father of lights”. It makes sense in the context of Plato’s philosophy of ideas and ideals. In Greek philosophy, the source of all beings is the ultimate Being, also known as Life, Light, Truth and Goodness. Beneath the source is a hierarchy of lesser beings living in various states of light and shadow depending on their position in the hierarchy. In saying that with God, “there is no variation or shadow due to change,” James is affirming the Christian doctrine of the equality of all God’s children.

We find the Jewish expression and understanding of the Law in the phrase “the perfect law, the law of liberty.” As we have seen before, this reflects the Jewish understanding of the word as Torah. From a Christian perspective the Word is Jesus Christ, God incarnate. In James the law of liberty is both freedom in Christ, and for those who have received this gift of God, our response to the gift. The imperatives contained in this passage of James reflect three of the writer’s major concerns as he or she has observed them in practice in the community of the faithful. The first is the contrast between God and the world. The second is the contrast between the attitudes and behaviors of believers and those of society at large. The third is the contrast between sham religiosity and the evidence of a new life in Christ. What I propose today is that the whole is an expression of stewardship, where you and I are responsible and accountable to God, for our response to all God’s good and perfect gifts, and how we use those gifts to build up the body of Christ to the glory of God’s name.

As we see from the opening line, the initiative and ownership rests entirely with God. God gives every perfect gift –not just some, or even the bits that we want to credit God with – but each, every, all, everyone, and everything. James’ perspective brings a great deal of clarity for us about the difference between God and the world. God’s generosity is without measure, given with unconditional love. We live with the knowledge that there is no way we could possibly repay God for the matchless gift of new and everlasting life in Christ Jesus our Lord. The cultural and societal norm is more along the lines of giving grudgingly or from a sense of duty, quite often for the glorification of self, and usually for some kind of return. James’ perspective also brings a great deal of clarity about our own giving, as stewards of God’s bounty. From the get go we notice that God’s giving is relational. God gives all gifts; we receive them, and then what? Are we supposed to hold on to the gifts, and if we do who benefits? We learn elsewhere that the purpose of God’s gifts is to do the work of Christ in the world, and especially to build up the church that is the body of Christ. In fact, having received the gifts, we are to listen to God, and discern God’s will for using our gifts. These prayers of discernment help us to realize that our offering to God’s service can be nothing less than our whole self, and all that we are blessed with. This is how God helps us to fulfill His commandment to love God with our whole heart, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Biblical love is not an emotional response; it is very much a matter of faith in action. There is no necessity to try and earn our salvation through works. It simply cannot be done.

God's gift of salvation is perfectly complete in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Although Martin Luther scorned the Book of James for its emphasis on law and actions, rather than salvation by faith alone, he also uses similar arguments to express the need for Christians to respond. James speaks of the "law of liberty". Luther writes, "A Christian is a free lord, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all." We come then to James' second contrast, the difference between the attitude and behaviors of Christians versus those of the world. To grow and practice God's Word means to put aside anger, and welcome the Word with meekness. James tells us that, "anger does not produce righteousness". On the other hand, meekness does not mean Christians are proverbial doormats. Rather it conveys the fruit of the Spirit that is the gift of gentleness in our way of being in the world. That alone is shocking to the highly competitive and aggressive way that is so common in our culture. Similarly, being stewards of God's life-giving gifts also means believers are counter-cultural in their behavior towards wealth and poverty. Neither poverty nor wealth are measures of our worth. Paradoxically, both offer opportunities to work the miracle of God's justice and equality in the world by means of our generous giving as stewards of God's grace. In other words we give when we are rich, and we give when we are poor. Both show the world that our worth stems from being a beloved child of God, and that our security is found only in Him. It is a matter of relationship, of faith, and of trust in God.

The book of James shares much in common with other wisdom literature with pithy moral imperatives. However, for James it is not the intellectual assent to wisdom that is characteristic of a faithful disciple, but the visible manifestation of how God's wisdom has changed us from our old selves to a new creation in Christ. We are truly deceiving ourselves if we think we are Christians and show no signs of how the Holy Spirit is working in our deeds of love. That is the contrast between a sham religiosity and transformative life in Christ. Jesus was inarguably a doer of good deeds, modeling God's love, even in His agony on the cross. James also shares Jesus passion and concern for the poorest of the poor, and the marginalized of society. Perhaps there is no better example of being stewards of God's love and hope in the world, as when we reach out to those who are most in need. This is how we build relationships, by giving of our time, giving of our God-given Spiritual gifts and talents, and giving as God gives; in abundance from abundance with thanksgiving for all that God has given us charge over. Generosity grounded in the character of God and embodied in the mission of Jesus is life changing.

According to James, pure religion is inclusive of personal morality and social justice. There is no room for double-mindedness. We cannot profess Christ and live in contradiction to that commitment. As lovers of Christ we ask, what are our ideals? How wide is the gap that we must work to close, between Christ and the reality of the world? James holds up a mirror for us. It is a mirror in which God and the world are reflected. When you and I look in the mirror, what do we see? Who is reflected there? I see Christ's hands and feet doing the work that God has prepared for us to do, and I see the face of Christ in the faces of this community. Our particular mission is to *Practice God's Graciousness*. A mission with many ways of being and doing in the world around us, and one in which all can participate. Let us continue to live, love and grow together doing all that God has called us to do, and being all that God has called us to be. Let us continue to give generously of ourselves, and every perfect gift from God, with truly grateful hearts, as faithful stewards of God's love.

Amen.