

RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

James 1.16-25; 5.1-6

September 2, 2018, Labor Weekend

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James 1.16-17 & 19-25 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

Make no mistake about this, my dear sisters and brothers, every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above, descending from the Creator of the heavenly luminaries, who cannot change and is never in shadow ...

Remember this, my dear sisters and brothers: be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to anger; for God's justice is never served by your anger. So do away with all your filth and the last vestiges of wickedness in you. Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you, because it has the power to save you. But act on this word – because if all you do is listen to it, you're deceiving yourselves. Those who listen to God's word but don't put it into practice are like those who look into mirrors at their own faces; they look at themselves, then go off and promptly forget what they looked like. But those who look steadily at the perfect law of freedom and make it their habit – not listening and then forgetting, but actively putting it into practice – will be blessed in all that they do.

Sermon: Resistance is Futile

My God has promised good to me, whose word my hope secures. That's from the great old hymn "Amazing Grace" by the former slave trader, John Newton.

John Newton seems to be channeling the letter of James which says: "Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you, because it has the power to save you."

I think it used to be a thing that folks would respond "word" when they heard something that sounded true to them.

And it wasn't just about agreeing to facts. It was an expression of feeling. It was more like: "Yes, sister or brother, I'm feeling that with you."

I don't know if it's a thing anymore but I thought we might try it out this morning. I am going to offer up a few statements about how I am feeling right about now and if they resonate with you – if you find yourself feeling the same way – than I invite you to say "word."

So here we go:

This country is a mess right now ...

I am in an almost desperate need of hope ...

I am going to miss that powerful, inspiring voice of Aretha Franklin ...

With all that's going on in the world, I am grateful to be here this morning ...

I'm tired of defending myself against those who claim to be Christians but spend most of their time supporting the actions of greed and hate.

Now, if you said "word" to that last one, you are in good company because that's the place James finds himself when he is talking about "welcoming the word that has been planted in you and that has the power to save you."

"True religion," James says, "Pure, unspoiled religion ... is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans when they are in need."

Imagine, for instance, that when John Newton wrote "amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me," he planned to just go on living his life as the captain of a slave ship. If you ask old John Newton about that amazing grace that saved him, it was not just about the word that changed his life. It was about the way those words called him to change the world.

Just how “amazing” is grace anyway if it ends up being an excuse for continuing to treat other human beings as property?

As I said a couple weeks ago, the power of Amazing Grace is not only that it was the personal testimony of someone who felt like a wretch. It was a public rallying cry to resist and to dismantle that whole wretched system of slavery.

It’s like James says: “... act on the word – because if all you do is listen to it, you’re deceiving yourselves.”

When I wrote the article for the *Spire* about James and the time we are spending with this letter in September, I mentioned that several of our ancestors – including the great reformer Martin Luther - thought that this letter had no place in the Bible. Some said it was “too Jewish,” for reasons that we can talk about later. What I will say now is that, if James intends to take seriously that the Jesus we follow was in fact a Jew, then James should feel right at home among us.

Probably the most challenging thing for James is that this letter gives us a peek into the open conflict going on in the early church. You have Paul saying: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and not of works.” And then James comes along and says: “Well, maybe that’s true but ‘faith without works is dead.’”

And James has some very particular things in mind. He talks about how we communicate; about how we treat the world and the people around us; and, since this is Labor Day Weekend, here are some thoughts about the consequences of how working people get treated.

James 4.17 – 5.6 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

Anyone who knows the right thing to do and doesn’t do so – to that person it is sin.

Now an answer for the rich: weep and howl for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth is all rotting; your clothes are eaten up by moths. Your gold and silver are corroding, and the same corrosion will be your own sentence: it will consume your flesh like fire. This is what you've stored up for yourselves to receive at the last day. Laborers mowed your fields, and you cheated them! Listen to the wages that you kept back: they call out against you; realize that the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of our God Most High. On earth you've had a life of comfort and luxury; you've been fattening yourselves for the day of slaughter. It was you who condemned the innocent and killed them; they offered you no resistance.

That's harsh. And the thing that sticks in my mind is "they offered you no resistance." It reminds me of the iconic line from the Borg queen in the Star Trek series: "Resistance is futile."

The belief system – the faith – that benefits the rich and the powerful is that there is no point in resistance because change is not possible. There is no point in resistance because nothing you do matters. There is no point in resistance because this is the best you can hope for.

Resistance is futile.

But James is saying that the word that has been planted in us as those who are trying to follow the way of Jesus is exactly that: "resistance."

Resist that which makes you feel like you and those around you don't matter because "make no mistake, my dear sisters and brothers, every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above." And that includes you.

Resist that kind of anger that does not serve justice.

Resist those ways of being together that promote privilege and prejudice.

Resist those ways of dealing with workers that disrespects their labor because our faith is not just about what we say but about what we do.

On vacation I started reading a book about the Rockefeller family called *America's Medicis.* It is mostly about the educational and cultural contributions of the Rockefeller family. But it was especially fascinating to me because the Rockefeller family, in addition to being extremely wealthy were committed "Northern" or now American Baptists.

The Rockefellers did a lot of great things. They helped to build the University of Chicago and the famous Riverside Church in New York City and they underwrote the beginning of the American Baptist ministers' retirement fund.

That's great. But, like the other "robber barons" of the late 1800s and early 1900s, John D. Rockefeller, Senior was known for his "ruthless business practices" and the treatment of workers at the time eventually led to the founding of the American Federation of Labor.

Having been trained at Brown University, John Jr. came under the influence of a social justice Baptist who was the president of Brown and John Jr. began removing himself from the boards of many of the family's businesses to concentrate on philanthropy.

But the family continued to have a controlling interest in something called the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company which was notorious for unsafe working conditions and the exploitation of workers who worked long hours for low wages. The United Mine Workers had tried to unionize the company but the Rockefeller family, including John Jr., refused. In September 1933, nine thousand workers went on strike, which meant losing not only their wages but their homes. So the workers set up "tent colonies" of resistance.

Eventually, violence broke out and the company's "guards torched the tents" where the strikers were living. Two women and eleven children died.

According to the book, that was a turning point for John Jr. He went directly to Colorado and hired a Canadian labor relations expert to work through the struggle. The situation made him aware, the author says, "of the inequities of the world, and he became a spokesman for new, more equitable industrial relations ... yet he stinted on the benefits of his household staff."

What this story tells me is that resistance is not futile. But neither is it ever perfect or complete.

Latino theologian Miguel de la Torre says: "Wherever oppression resides, one can also find resistance."

Resistance is not futile. But it is also often imperfect and incomplete. James would say, "resist anyway."

This is what I think I am learning about resistance. It's not just about what we reject. It's about what we embrace.

James says that we should resist anger that does not serve God's justice not simply because we should reject unproductive strategies for protest but because we imagine and we embrace a different way of communicating with each other.

We resist ways of being together that promote privilege and prejudice not just because we reject discrimination but because we embrace diversity and we can imagine what a beloved community would look like.

We resist ways of dealing with workers that disrespects their labor not only because it is bad business but because we embrace every sister and brother is a gift from God.

Resistance is not futile. And it is not only about rejecting evil. It is embracing, no matter how imperfectly or incompletely, that which is good.

“My God has promised good to me,” the old slave trader says, “whose word my hope secures.

And I’m in desperate need of some hope this morning. I need to know that resistance is not futile. I need to know that we shall overcome someday.

So this day – today - if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

About the conflict between James and Paul see Reza Aslan, “The Just One,” *Zealot: The Life and times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Random House, 2013), pp.197-212. The *Inclusive bible* was produced as a gender-equal translation by Priests for Equality. Suzanne Loebel, *America’s Medicis: The Rockefellers and Their Astonishing Cultural Legacy* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), pp. 22-25. Miguel de la Torre, *Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p.1.