

Blessed Disturbance

The first in a four part Stewardship Series on *Let your Yes be YES!!*

October 8, 2006 ~ 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Susan Morrison

James 1: 9 – 11; 19 – 25

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Mark 10: 17 - 22

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

* * * * *

The Book of James and the parables of Jesus as recorded in Mark will be our texts this month as we reflect and pray about our stewardship and make our commitment to the church for the coming year. Now the Book of James has been called “scandalous.” Martin Luther said it was “an epistle of straw.” Why does this book of the bible have such a bad reputation? For years, scholars and theologians objected to its emphasis on the need to put our faith into action. “Faith without works is dead” declares the author, James, who actually is thought to be James, the brother of Jesus. But faith alone saves, argued the interpreters of scripture. You can’t earn salvation; it is a gift from God.

But over the years, the Book of James has become more and more credible; more and more appreciated. Without a response to our faith, without deeds of action, Jesus' intentions for life will never be fulfilled. Personally, I find James to be a needed antidote to our preoccupation with wealth and materialism. James offers us an alternative system of values and action, rooted in Jesus' stories and parables.

James begins by acknowledging that God IS the source of all of our blessings. "God gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" claims James in the opening verses of this epistle. That's what our faith teaches us. We begin with the extraordinary blessings of God. With grateful hearts we receive Jesus Christ, God's gift of salvation to us. With Fanny Crosby we sing.....

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Perfect submission, all is at rest; I in my Savior am happy and blest,
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love.
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long."

But when we reread this morning's lessons, we realize that were James or Mark to write a hymn as accompaniment to the readings, the lyrics might be "**Blessed disturbance**, Jesus is mine!" Remember it is James who wrote:

"Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away."

And it was Jesus who advised us: "sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, then come, follow me."

A few weeks ago we heard Jesus inviting his followers to "pick up your cross and follow me." Who can forget the fabulous anthem that Charles Turner wrote and that the choir sang emphasizing Jesus' risk taking invitation? The call to "sell our possessions, giving money to those who have none" should not surprise us! It's a pervasive message in all of the gospels. It's at the core of discipleship.

For you see, this morning's lessons are really not about money and wealth. They are guidelines for discipleship. And just as the rich young man was disturbed by Jesus' request, so are we if we are really honest and really get what Jesus' asks of us. **Blessed disturbance**, if Jesus is ours!

Both Jesus and James invite us to strip down, to let go of those things that we grasp. Writes one commentator: "Speaking of the things we have, it might be more accurate to say, not that we have many things, but that our things have us." (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol.28, No. 4, p. 13) We like to think of ourselves as free and unattached. But in reality, many of us are sacrificing our health, our families, even our souls to material

things. We claim to be free and independent when in reality we are the ones that are enslaved!

Yes, we need the holy disturbance of this morning's lessons because we lack an authentic theology of material possessions. Enough is never enough. There's always one more thing that would make us happy. There's one more toy that we can buy for our children or grandchildren. We hunger to feel satisfied. We need the redeeming disturbance of this story to remind us that there is a deeper hunger in us that only God can satisfy. Like children who have stayed too long at the fair, we are choked with peanuts, popcorn and cotton candy and have no taste for the nourishment we truly need. Like the wealthy good person in the story, we begin asking about eternal life but walk away inventorying our possessions before the story is over. (*Lectionary Homiletics*, October 2000, p. 24) We need desperately the disturbance of this morning's gospel story to help us reset our priorities, distinguish between our wants and our needs, and give away whatever it is that is keeping us from following Jesus.

It was at least ten years ago that Jay and I first met Cheryl Avery. At the time, she was living in Managua, Nicaragua at Casa Amanacer, the house owned by the New England Conference in Managua that serves as a retreat center for delegations who traveled to Nicaragua as part of our covenant with over 100 independent Protestant churches in Nicaragua. Cheryl had been a long time member of the Belmont UMC when she was living in her own home in Belmont and working at a financial institution in Boston. Intrigued by the covenant formed between our annual conference and the churches of Nicaragua, Cheryl had gone with a delegation to see for herself the life and faith of the poorest of poor Christians in Central America. Perhaps upon return, Cheryl heard this morning's gospel lesson. Maybe she studied the Book of James. She heard Jesus calling her to be free of her possessions, to pick up her cross and follow Him. Cheryl experienced **blessed disturbance**. She decided to say yes.

I will always stand in awe of what this woman did. She rented her house, left a six figure job and offered to volunteer as the liaison from our annual conference to the churches in the Nicaraguan covenant. As coordinator of New England delegations, she moved into Casa Amanacer and spent four years connecting United Methodists from New England with Christian brothers and sisters in communities throughout Nicaragua.

It was during these years that Cheryl became aware that the Managua dump is home to about 125 families. Many of them are third generation extended families. Another 1,000-2,000 people arrive daily to look for food to eat and recyclable materials to sell. The families live in and around the smoldering garbage in shacks consisting of corrugated tin, cardboard and black plastic. Six months a year, the narrow roads are filled with mud as thick as quicksand and a gag-producing stench. During the dry season, the powder-like dust settles on everything and everyone. Year-round, the sun beats mercilessly on the backs of those who scavenge.

She learned that the Managua government referred to the dump as "the most dangerous place to work" in the city. Children are the hardest hit: one-third of the children have

lead in their blood. Children routinely are disfigured as they search through metal and glass, and even killed by the very trucks that bring them hope of a meal.

Once again she experienced Jesus' **blessed disturbance**. This time she sold her home back in Belmont in order to have a down payment for 35 acres of fertile farmland in the highlands of Masaya. And this was her vision: with the help of God, she would establish a community of up to 10 families from the Managua dump. There would be cinderblock houses, a school, gardens to feed the families and crops to generate income for the community. Life skills would be taught to adults and children and literacy would be a priority. Adults would be trained in construction, agriculture, small business practices and craft making. And all of this would be funded by grants, NGO's and financial commitments from churches.

It has been a little over 3 years since Cheryl responded to God's **blessed disturbance** and birthed Project Chacocente. There are currently eight families living in cinder block houses, which, after five years, will be theirs along with 2 acres of land. A school has been built and children are being educated. 5,000 plantain seeds were sown and the first crop netted \$650. 40% of the profit was returned to the families; 40% to the project and 20% was retained for maintenance to the plantain trees.

Cheryl's vision has become a reality. I often think of her when I pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Cheryl has brought heaven to earth for the poorest of the poor in Nicaragua. She has literally transported them from hell to heaven and in doing so, has realized a bit of the kingdom, the reign of God here on earth.

"Go" said Jesus. "Sell your possessions, give the money to the poor and follow me." In this season of stewardship, I want you to envision the kinds of project that Holy Trinity could sponsor or support locally or globally if everyone could experience Jesus' **blessed disturbance!!** And I'm not talking about selling our houses or leaving our jobs. I'm talking about being free of what enslaves us and believing that the opposite of rich might not be poor but being free! When Jesus calls and we follow, stuff gets left behind. It's the consequence of being his disciple. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Pulpit Resource*, Vo. 25, No.4, p. 10)

Brother James is on to something. Faith without works is dead! Faith is more than just a matter for the mind. Faith is love in action. Thank God for our blessed assurance. And thank God for our blessed disturbance. Together they define what it means to be a disciple, to say Yes to Jesus' summons: come and follow me.

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.

