

James 1:17-27

¹⁷Every 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. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that **we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures (we are a new creation – the Spirit transforms us).**

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 (the irony is that perfect law frees us)** and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷**Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (NO MENTION OF RITUALS OTHER THAN CARING AND RESISTING TEMPTATION).**

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples **not live according to the tradition of the elders**, but eat with defiled hands?"

⁶He said to them, "**Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites**, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,

but **their hearts are far from me;**

⁷in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, **but the things that come out are what defile."**

²¹**For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come:** fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

LOVE FLOWS FROM THE HEART OF GOD

Question: How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer: *Change? You can't change that bulb; my grandfather donated that bulb back in 1965!*

I'm sure you get it. Churches and even parsonages are full of stuff that is sacred to someone or other. One pastor, back in the days when churches were responsible for furnishing the parsonage, had a very old couch that was donated by one of the more influential families, a family with quite a history in the church. The pastor's husband thought the couch ugly and wanted to throw it away, but the pastor wisely advised him to move it into the basement. During the church Christmas party, at the parsonage, one of the family members of that family that had donated the couch noticed that the couch was nowhere to be seen. Inquiries were made, and when that person discovered that the memorial couch was in the basement, they were a bit upset. In the end, the pastor found a more visible place for the memorial couch on the main floor of the parsonage, but the family who donated the couch never got over the fact that it been relegated to the basement of the parsonage for several months.

Well, if sacred relics can be found in a parsonage, you can be sure that they can be found in greater abundance in churches. Churches themselves become relics that are maintained by life-time members. The very suggestion of changing some part of the church can cause great distress, even cardiac arrest to some folks. *You start talking about renovating and you better have a defibrillator on hand.* We can laugh, but this sort of thing happens in a church; some folks leave the church when the sanctuary is redesigned, or the hymnal is replaced, or (God forbid) Team Bethel recruits a drummer! Now the church itself preserves some customs, like baptism and holy communion – these are sacraments - but sometimes we think of a custom as if it was a sacrament, as if we are affronting God be even considering a change.

Our Gospel lesson today speaks to this problem. Jesus is having a spat with those pesky Pharisees again, this time because some of Jesus' disciples are not honoring the traditions of the elders because they didn't wash their hands. Now I don't think Jesus had anything against washing one's hands before eating; that's just good hygiene. But the Pharisees were not concerned about hygiene; they were concerned with tradition. They weren't saying, "Hey Jesus, your friends could get awfully sick eating with dirty hands." No, they were upset because the disciples weren't following their customs (not laws, but customs). Jesus and his disciples were Jews, and if you're a Jew you should not eat with defiled hands, so the Pharisees thought. Jesus and his disciples were clearly operating outside the **comfort zone** of the Pharisees.

Comfort zone; that's an interesting concept, isn't it? What is a comfort zone? It's a place where we feel safe and protected from whatever may disrupt our peace. In a very concrete way, our HOME can be a comfort zone – it fills our need for safety and privacy; we can take off our shoes, flop down on the sofa, turn on the TV and eat a bowl of ice cream (ah, ice cream! That's comfort for you) and be completely relaxed. It seems pretty basic and innocent, right? Everyone has a comfort zone? Is there anything wrong with protecting that comfort zone? Well, consider everything that is necessary for you to reside in that comfort zone. Say your comfort zone is on that couch in front of the television watching Turner Classic Movies with a bowl of Ben & Jerry's strawberry ice cream. If it's 95 degrees outdoors, you may need air conditioning to be truly comfortable in your home, which means you need electricity, and you need enough money to pay for your electricity and your apartment or your home, which usually means you need a job. If your comfort zone is on the couch in front of the TV with a bowl of ice cream, you need a couch, a freezer in which to keep the ice cream, a TV, and a subscription to cable television, reliable cable service (God knows that customer service reps for cable TV companies know just how serious people are about those comfort zones – imagine how many calls they field when there is an outage). And let's assume that your comfort zone includes watching a show that requires your attention. Now your comfort zone requires that your roommates or spouse or children don't distract you from watching the program, that your neighbors are not mowing the lawn or doing construction or that your walls are thick enough to block out the noise. And what about phone calls? Do you have a job that requires you to be on call? Does having your phone always on interfere with your comfort zone? What about the folks that ring your doorbell and ask if you can take a brief survey or ask what church you attend? Is there any way you can turn off your doorbell?

You see, your comfort zone may require a lot of maintenance.

And that's only your "physical" comfort zone; what about your social comfort zones? Are there certain topics of conversation that make you squirm or look for a convenient exit? Are there certain buttons that you don't want people to push? Are there certain people that you just avoid because of some past incident or because they are prone to pull you out of your comfort zone (it's been awhile since I've had anyone walk out of church during my sermons, but I know that some of the things I say can make people squirm)? And, to bring us back to our scripture lesson, do people ever do things here in the church that take you out of your comfort zone? Do the hymns or the chairs or the prayers or the length of the service cause you some discomfort? Does the pastor's ranting about your comfort zone cause you some discomfort?

Both our Epistle lesson and our Gospel lessons are concerned with such comfort zones. First century Jews and first century Christians, twenty-first century Jews and twenty-first century Christians, tend to forget the essence of real religion when they get too caught up in comfort zones. James writes, **“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”** That doesn’t mean to lock yourself in your house and only watch Christian broadcasts; you can’t care for many orphans and widows from the confines of your home. What James is saying is that true religion is about caring for others, and that means taking into account what others like and what others prefer, not insisting upon your own way all the time. True religion is not about washing your hands before you eat (*because that’s the way we’ve ALWAYS done it at our church*). True religion is about caring, and caring is about loving, and if you have built high walls to protect your comfort zone you have in essence caged yourself in and prevented yourself from truly loving others. Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites, rightfully so, because they imagined themselves to be close to God by embracing human precepts and doctrines, by maintaining the traditions of their elders, but those things had nothing to do with being close to God; they had more to do with being self-righteous. The Pharisees *thought* that such practices put them closer to God when it actually kept them further away from God because their traditions did more to distinguish them from others than they did to unite them with others. It made them insiders, folks who knew what rituals really pleased God, and it made everyone else an outsider. And what they kept *in* was contempt for others, intransigence, slander, pride, and folly. True religion, James says, is about care. It’s about love. And it’s about keeping ourselves unstained by the superficiality and by human pride.

True religion means finding your comfort zone in the heart of God...go figure. Jesus scolds the Pharisees because *their* hearts were far from God. Our hearts need to rest in God’s heart, because only in the heart of God do we learn what true love is. Only when we experience God’s care for us, his forgiveness and grace, his commitment to us and his power at work *in* us through his Spirit do we know what love is and we find our comfort zone in loving others and being loved first and foremost by God (because, unfortunately, not every human being has learned to love, and if you’re waiting for another person to love you, you may be waiting for a very long time). God’s love is different. It’s always there when you need it. It’s there when you don’t think you need it.

And God has no comfort zone, or rather all of creation is God’s comfort zone. God does not approve of fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, or folly, all those evil things that flow from the

human heart, and yet God loves us even when we sin. Whatever ditch we may fall into, God is always ready to come down there with us and help us out of the ditch.

So when we find our comfort zone in the heart of God, we too can find comfort in all other places, because God goes with us into those places, and we can face every circumstance with God's peace surrounding us.

And because we find true comfort in the heart of God, we don't need to create any artificial comfort zone founded on the traditions of our elders. Our comfort now becomes contingent upon *other's* comfort, the place where their true needs are attended to. Because we can reside in the heart of God, and because God can abide in our heart, God's love can flow through us, outward into a world that desperately needs to know God's love.

So the real question this morning is not, "How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb," but rather, "Do the Methodists want to change the light bulb?" Are we too dependent upon the old one? Will replacing it take us out of our comfort zone? My prayer for you this morning is that you would build your comfort zone in the heart of God. Pray. Read scripture. Pray. Come to church and Bible studies. Pray. Sing hymns and uplifting songs. And did I mention pray? So often our prayers are for other people and for particular problems. Be a little more selfish; pray for a closer relationship with God. Pray that you would know the heart of God and dwell therein. There is no need for any other comfort zone when you dwell in the heart of God.

And once your comfort zone is in the heart of God, pray that God's love would flow in you and through you to those around you. See if your greatest need becomes providing for others' needs.