

Family Functions: RESTORING COMMUNITY **James 2:14-17; 3:13-18**

Well, graduates, probably the last thing in the world you want to hear right now is something about “teachers and tests.” You’ve just said goodbye to your teachers after first passing at least enough of their tests that they decided to let you out!

Most of you did a lot better than that, of course—but whatever your rank in class, you’ve now completed another phase of your education. You’re a graduate; and we, your church family, congratulate you on your accomplishment.

Still, although I hate to have to break this to you, there are more teachers and tests in your future—and that’s true whether or not you pursue further education. A favorite Scripture passage for many of us serves as a reminder. Listen to how it begins:

“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to **test** Jesus. “**Teacher**,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25) So there you have it: teachers and tests!

Jesus is the Teacher. By the way, those of you who are about to head off to college will be trading in your teachers for professors. Professors are like teachers on steroids! Just do your best.

Now, the student in this passage is already a lawyer. Don’t think your education is complete just because you’re graduating. By the way, any of you plan to be lawyers? (Admit it???)

Well, here we have a lawyer who evidently is still trying to learn, so he asks Jesus, “Teacher, what must I do to pass the test”—granted, it’s a really big test: he wants assurance that he will receive eternal life!

Being a lawyer, he was probably looking for something very specific in Jesus’ answer, hoping to hear such exact language there would be no way to misinterpret it’s intentions—even if it meant you also had to be a lawyer to understand it.

But most of us know that’s not what Jesus did at all. Instead, after a brief discussion about loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves, the lawyer, in good legal tradition, asked to have the term “neighbor” defined.

Instead of giving the kind of clear definition the lawyer wanted, however, the Master Teacher told a parable. This well-known story begins: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." (Luke 10:30)

You know this story, don't you? A priest passes by, then a Levite. Neither stops to help the man. Then, a Samaritan comes by. The lawyer KNOWS HE'LL never stop—NOT a SAMARITAN--but he does.

So the lawyer's thinking that this no-good half-breed—which is how he saw Samaritans—he knew this low-life was only seeing if the robbers had left anything that he could scavenge.

Instead, the Samaritan bandages the man's wounds, places him on his own donkey, and takes the wounded man to a place where he can receive proper care. He even pays the medical bills himself—even without an act of Congress!

Now, I think there are many things the Teacher wants his students to learn from this—and if you are a Christian, then Jesus is your Teacher—but what I see most of all in this story is a sense of community. The word "neighbor" is used, and Jesus basically says that our neighbor is someone who is willing to take care of us—just as we are willing to take care of them.

But what we're not told here, because anyone that Luke sent his Gospel to would already know this quite well—the injured man and the Good Samaritan weren't neighbors at all—at least, not by any definition the lawyer would have found reasonable. But Jesus was so "loosey-goosey" in His definition it made it seem like ANYONE could be our neighbor—which is precisely the point!

Graduates, it seems to me that the kind of community Jesus is describing here has yet to happen. If that's true, then these teachings of Jesus have been lost on us. One of the challenges before your generation of Christians, I believe, is how to restore our sense of community—from Jesus' perspective.

Our text for today comes from one who knew Jesus very well. There was a time when he thought Jesus was crazy. Granted, it's probably fairly common for one brother to think this about another. You see, the writer of our text is James, a brother of Jesus who once tried to talk Him out of what He was doing, but later became a devout Christian and the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

So there are lots of good reasons to listen to what James says about the kind of life that honors Christ. In James 2, we read:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Some things have to happen in communities, especially if it's a community like the church—a community that's founded upon faith in Christ. But I suppose this would also need to be true in any really good community.

It's just that a community of Christians—and notice I didn't say a Christian community—communities don't turn to Christ in faith, only the individuals who compose them can do that—but a community of Christians should be better at being community than any other—simply because our Teacher is Jesus!

Next, inspired by the Spirit of Christ, James tells us more in his book about making good communities happen. Listen:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (Js. 3:13-18)

In these two brief passages, James tells us about communities that please God. He tells us how the people in these communities take care of those who are truly in need, and how they relate to everyone else in the community with a kind of godly wisdom, which James describes as being 'pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.'

So when Jesus tries to impress upon the lawyer what it means to be a neighbor, this is the kind of stuff he emphasizes by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. And, friends, as our world keeps getting smaller, the importance of this teaching of Jesus keeps growing bigger.

Everybody knew that when Jesus told that Jewish lawyer that he should think of the Samaritan as his “neighbor” that the question changed from “Who is my neighbor?” to “Who in the world isn’t?”

Graduates, I think this just may be your generations’ big question. In a world where we increasingly struggle to see anyone who doesn’t look like, talk like, believe like, or vote like us as our neighbor, you may be called upon to both see and treat these very different folks as your neighbors in order to survive.

Not that survival should be your primary motivation. I hope the reason you will see them and treat them as neighbors is because you seek to be true to Christ, true to His teachings, in a world that’s practically forgotten what this means.

If you are ever to be successful in restoring our sense of community, you’ll have to actually follow Jesus Christ. You’ll need to go through the same kind of radical transformation in the way you see and think about the world that Jesus proposed to the lawyer that day and that his brother James later wrote about.

I ran into a spider web recently—in the dark, no less. That’s the worst time to run into a spider web—because you have no idea where the spider is! Maybe this was actually some kind of “spider justice,” though, because I’ll let you in on a little secret.

When I see a really good spider web, I like to take a stick and disturb it a bit—just to see the spider scamper across the web thinking the pizza delivery guy has come. Actually, the spider thinks a fly has flown into his web, so he comes running over to plan supper. You know what they say, “times fun when you’re having flies!” Anyway, it’s amazing how this system works.

Frederick Buechner has likened humankind to “an enormous spider web, so that if you touch it anywhere you set the whole thing trembling...As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility, toward the people we meet, we too are setting the spider web atremble. The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in

turn another, until who knows when the trembling stops or in what far place or time my touch will be felt.”
(The Hungering Dark, pp.45-46)

By the way, Buechner wrote this book in the late 1960’s, long before we had anything like a “world wide web” which so greatly multiplies, for good or ill, our touches and the tremblings that result from them. Graduates, your generation will have to find ways to use all this technology for good purposes, for restoring our communities, for example, instead of destroying them.

Maybe some of you are wondering what all this has to do with “Family Functions,” which has been our emphasis over the last few weeks. Well, families don’t exist in isolation. Families are part of the communities in which they live.

Our community impacts our family—for better or worse—so this is yet another vital Christian concern—as well as a family concern. Jesus would not have brought up this “good neighbor” business otherwise, nor would James have been inspired to share with us such practical guidelines for living with and relating to others.

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.” (James 2:15) James highlights the need; and then he says we should either try to respond to it or stop pretending to be followers of Christ.

Communities filled with Christians answer the call to help—as we did just last week with Family Promise. Housing has now been found for two of the three families who were with us--and our whole community is strengthened in the process.

I know it’s not popular to think this way today, even in some churches unfortunately, but I believe it’s still Christian. Graduates, I’m glad this church has tried to set a good example for you in this regard—with low-cost senior adult housing at the Wilmary, mentoring at-risk children at Calhoun School, our New Year’s Day community meal and coat giveaway, our youth mission trips to Mexico and other places, and the list goes on.

Listen, if enough churches do this well enough, maybe we can actually live in a community that reflects Christian values—maybe even in a nation and world that does this as well. Increasingly, we are one big community. As followers of Christ, we’ve been

assigned the task of bearing witness to the kind of community our Lord wants His world to be.

Maybe I'm naïve, but I'm convinced this will never come about through anyone's political agendas or demonstrations of power—except, of course, the power of Christian love and witness and what James calls “wisdom from heaven.” Talk about an out-of-fashion way to live, listen again to what James says:

“...the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:18)

By the way, that word “righteousness” means “a right relationship with God and our fellowman.” That's Christian community, and James learned this from Jesus. His brother's message was all about reconciliation—overcoming the conflicts between us and God and the conflicts between us and one another. Jesus made it clear that neither problem is solved until both problems are solved.

So grads, you'll have your hands full if you seek to be part of the solution, if you want to be restorers of community instead of joining forces with those who make the divisions worse. And like the rest of us, you'll need to choose your teachers carefully.

Your professors may or may not help you with this. I wouldn't count on too many leaders of industry or finance either. If a politician claims he's going to bring us all together, be skeptical.

If you really want to be part of making a difference in this world, if you have a desire to restore a sense of community to our lives, you'll need to let Jesus be your Teacher—and then be courageous enough to call into question what others are pushing that you know doesn't jive with what Jesus is teaching.

And, yes, people will put you to the test—just like they did Jesus. He passed with flying colors. They did their worst to Jesus, but He overcame. He's our Savior, and He's Lord of all!

1) By His grace, guidance, and mercy at work in you, may Jesus Christ enable you to overcome those who seek to divide and destroy community. 2) By His love, and through the power of a life lived faithful to Him, may you be reconcilers, restorers of community, for Christ's sake—and ours!