

James: The Best of Conservatism

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Scripture: Acts 15:1-21; James 2:14-26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We have been noting in the Eastertide season that there is a variety of religious experience. When one surveys the landscape of the Church, that must be obvious. And it is obvious, as well, in the early leaders of the Christian movement as we find them in the New Testament documents.

I have dealt with Paul in regard to his recognition of the Spirit/flesh civil war that rages with the human being and in regard to his misreading of the time line of history where his generation was in the unfolding drama of history. I will come back to him in a few weeks, but I mention him now because today our focus is James, and James and Paul are studies in contrast.

Both were of the strictest observants of Judaism.

Paul was encountered by a vision of the risen, ascended Christ and made a radical departure from his former Pharisaic Jewish observance. James was given an appearance encounter by Jesus after Easter, according to Paul, convincing him that Jesus was the Messiah, but he remained an observant Jew until his execution in the 60s, having become the Bishop of the Jerusalem Mother Church, a "Christian" Church of observant Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah, crucified, raised from the dead, ascended to the presence of God from whence they expected his imminent return.

Paul, the radical innovator.

James, the conservative guardian of tradition.

Reflecting on these matters is not simply for the purpose of historical interest; it has everything to do with how we today conserve the core insights and truths of the Christian tradition and at the same time incorporate the ever growing knowledge available to us from ancient times, from historical study of Christian origins, from biblical research, and the exploding knowledge of the world of

which we are a part, and how we accommodate the tradition to new understanding.

Think with me about James, the brother of Jesus, whom I point to as representing the best of conservatism. Conservatism has become a label we put on political parties or parties within an institution such as the Church. Conservative is usually paired with liberal as its opposite. But, that is really unfortunate. I have carried with me since the 60s when I first read it, a statement by Walter Lippmann:

Every truly civilized and enlightened man is conservative and liberal and progressive. He is conservative because the roots of our civilization lie in those three ancient kingdoms of the Mediterranean: Israel, Greece, and Rome.

He is liberal because the laws must be administered with charity and magnanimity.

He is progressive because the times change and we must act in the world as it is and as it is becoming.

Here, liberal points to a liberal spirit as open and magnanimous, while the word progressive is probably what we think of as liberal - at least in the Church. If we agree, then we would see Paul as progressive and James as conservative. But, if we believe Lippmann, a civilized and enlightened person will hold in tension conservatism and progressivism and that, because we are shaped by a tradition that is rooted in history when certain core values and understandings come to expression, and we are in the stream of history whose one constant is change, evolution, and emergence of the new.

Unfortunately, in times like ours, marked by culture wars and in the Church by the rhetoric of the religious right and defensiveness of the mainline, we tend to label and to engage in name calling and we fail to recognize that there are truths and values that shape the tradition that must be preserved and yet must be allowed to evolve with the changing landscape of history.

I use conservative in that proper sense of the word as the concern to learn the roots of the tradition and preserve the core values and insights in order that they may be passed on and not lost. Note: Such an understanding of conservatism is not at all fundamentalism which is simply the reiteration of yesterday's answers to today's question.

James was a Conservative in contrast to Paul who was a Progressive, but both James and Paul were both conservative and progressive - one more this, the other more that, but both struggling with a very real and still present struggle - preserving the best of the past while opening to the needs of the present and openness to the future.

The James we are talking about is the brother of Jesus, the author of the Letter of James in the New Testament, called James the Just or the Righteous. I've never really thought about James in terms of his religious experience, but it is fascinating to think about where he came from and where he moved.

Because it is so difficult to think about Jesus as a real flesh and blood human being, I suspect we don't think much about what it must have been like in the home of Mary and Joseph while he was growing up. James grew up with him. They must have played together, worked together, argued, fought. All of that is without record. We do know, however, that when Jesus left home for his ministry he proved embarrassing to the family. Mark 3 tells how the word was out that he was mad and Mary and his brothers came to take him home. He did not go out to talk to them. Rather, he said, "Who is my mother, my brother, my sister - the one who does the will of God."

Obviously, there was alienation and estrangement. From non-canonical sources we know that James was an ascetic, perhaps a Nazirite, one who life long follows a very strict rule of holy living. If James was a Nazirite, would he not have been shocked and incensed at the loose practices of his brother? Would he not have been scandalized by Jesus' overturning the conventional wisdom of the day - his open table fellowship and his disregard for the ritual purity laws?

While we have no way of knowing, I find it fascinating to think about how contrasting were these two brothers out of the same home. Of course, we can simply say the radical newness Jesus proclaimed and lived out was the consequence of the Spirit that filled him. He saw something; he acted on it. James remained faithful to the whole tradition that was part of their parental home.

But, Paul tells us the risen Christ appeared to James and we know from Paul's letters and the Book of Acts that James became the leader of the Jerusalem Church. If we follow the story in Acts, Paul goes on the missionary journey with Barnabas, sent out by the Church in Antioch.

Now, Antioch was a great metropolitan center. It was there that non-Jews, Gentiles, were first evangelized and it was in Antioch that followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

Now you have a mixed congregation, an integrated congregation - Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The burning issue was whether the Gentiles would have to become Jews by practicing circumcision and observing the food laws. Some Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem, saying there was no salvation except by observing the Jewish law. Paul strenuously objected. He had quite another vision.

To settle the issue, a Council was called in Jerusalem. Each side presented their case – Peter told of his experience with Cornelius and the obvious lesson that God showed no partiality. Paul and Barnabas told of their experiences of God's grace experienced by Gentiles on their mission trip.

It was then James, leader and conscience of the Council, who spoke. He went to the Hebrew scriptures which pointed to a time when the Gentiles would be included and he made the decision

... we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God –

He did counsel that they abstain from certain practices that would be especially offensive to the Jewish Christian congregants. The decision was affirmed.

There you have James the Conservative who was also progressive – a new situation, new times, therefore modifications - Gentiles received as members of the Christian Church, recipients of the grace of God, possessors of the Holy Spirit, but not having to become observant Jews. James was conservative in that he searched the scripture tradition and found a basis for this innovation. But, what of James; what of James' religious experiences?

I am looking forward to the weekend in November when the Jewish scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, is with us. Her theme will be the breakup of Judaism and Christianity - What was lost? What was gained? We have in Paul and James the dilemma of two differing visions – Paul remained a Jew and the God of Israel was his God. But, the traditional religious observances came to be for Paul, and I suspect Peter, matters of indifference - to observe or not to observe; it was not something of critical import.

Not so for James; he remained to his death fully observant and he was the leader of a Jewish Christian community, fully observant. He has an Epistle in the New Testament. It is interesting to read it next to Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example, or Romans. James' famous claim is

Faith without works is dead.

Paul claimed we are saved by grace alone through faith alone without any religious observance. Good works follow, worship follows, righteous living follows, but no religious observances or good works are elements of our salvation. Paul said Faith without works; James said Faith was demonstrated in works. What James calls for is certainly what we would claim as the proper response of grace - if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, you supply those bodily needs. Faith without such works of compassion is dead. Certainly Paul would agree. But, where then was the difference?

It was nuance; yet it was not without consequence. It created two different tone qualities in the religious communities.

James was the best of the conservative end of the Christian spectrum because he made room for new practice and conditions in a new situation. But, he was conservative in that he remained in the original mold. Martin Luther with his explosive experience of God's grace loved Paul and strongly disliked James. He called his letter an Epistle of Straw, although later in life he wondered if he had been too hard on James.

Human society, political institutions, educational establishments, religious traditions are always in tension because all are enmeshed in the stream of history which is ever moving into new territory, gaining fresh perspective, discovering new information, creating novel experiences that call for innovative solutions and creative adjustment.

For example, one of the great institutions of this nation is under siege - the Public School. Governor Jeb Bush has apparently succeeded in his intention to make Florida a total voucher system state. The Walton Foundation, created by the success of Wal-Mart, is behind a scholarship program to provide money for some 40,000 students to afford private schooling. These are simply examples of a sharp debate going on currently and destined to become more intense between advocates of public education and advocates of private schooling. Where will it lead us?

The conservative impulse warns about losing what has been a great shaper of the American ethos. The progressive reformers point to the weaknesses and failures of the public school. The Conservative will not stand pat, refusing change, but will insist that certain values and truths not be lost. The Progressive sees much that could well be left behind in the realization of a new vision.

It is not so dangerous to speak of education in the Church; it is a step removed from the center of the religious community and thus not of such emotional intensity. But, what if we speak of confessional loyalty, biblical interpretation, congregational practice? It is the same kind of tension.

That is why we have established the Center for Religion and Life and that is why we are bringing in the best of scholarship and people on the cutting edge of theological reflection and historical research. We are committed to conservatism and progress in a spirit of liberality.

James lives here. He says with a sigh and some fear and trembling, "Well, okay. But remember, don't forget!" He knows movement, evolution of knowledge and practice is the rule of life, but he is committed to preserving the light and truth of the founding vision.

Marcus Borg, who will be with us next weekend, is not a James; he is rather a Paul in terms of a new vision. But, while his scholarship pushes him to a new vision, he clearly brings to that scholarship the experience of communion with God; he is a deeply spiritual person. His most recent publication is in collaboration with an English scholar, N. T. Wright, who is James all over again. In *The Meaning of Jesus*, they each write on the same question in each chapter, for example, "What Did Jesus Do and Teach?," "The Death of Jesus," on resurrection, virgin birth, "Was Jesus God?," "The Virgin Birth," the Second Coming and the Christian life.

They were students together at Oxford University and they remain good friends, holding each other in high esteem and affection. And they take differing views on all the cardinal points of these biblical and theological questions. Thus, they are a model of civil discourse, of civility and humane value. From their conversation comes insight and fresh understanding.

I read *The Meaning of Jesus* and have no question but that Marcus Borg has pursued the critical analysis of Christian origins, discerned the implications and created a fresh paradigm of the Christian vision. Wright's scholarship is not in question, but he refuses to follow the data and continues to hold to an understanding of the Christian message not much different than I held when I left seminary 39 years ago this month.

What makes a James, a Paul, a Marcus, a Tom Wright? What determines how we receive fresh insight, new information? How we respond to the implications of new knowledge?

Some of us have conservative genes, some progressive genes, perhaps. Some of us float above with no earth-shaking experience; for some of us the earth moves beneath us and we see something radically different than we ever saw before. We need each other.

We need to be in conversation. We don't need fundamentalists, those who refuse to open themselves to new knowledge, refuse to think and simply reiterate yesterday's answer to today's question and most often with defensiveness and hostility born of insecurity.

But, we need those like James who recognizes the need for new ways for new situations in the unfolding of history, but who holds to the ways of the past, finding there still that which keeps him in conscious communion with God. James was a really good person, serious, faithful, trustworthy - and you could talk to him.

He was the best of conservatism.