



“WE THE PEOPLE”

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 2:1-17

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, September 8, 2024, Palooza Sunday

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James 2: 1-17, The Message translation

My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith. If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, "Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!" and either ignore the street person or say, "Better sit here in the back row," haven't you segregated God's children and proved that you are judges who can't be trusted?

Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? God chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren't they the ones who scorn the new name—"Christian"—used in your baptisms?

You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: "Love others as you love yourself." But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it. You can't pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God's law and ignoring others.

Talk and act like a person expecting to be judged by the Rule that sets us free. For if you refuse to act kindly, you can hardly expect to be treated kindly. Kind mercy wins over harsh judgment every time.

Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?

“We the people” is an evocation of a nation promising life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

“We the people” is an evocation of a faith promising no partiality, promising that all will be received as children of God.

Both nation and faith dinged, dented, and dimmed by their entanglement with white colonizers, empire’s lust for dominance and enforced conformity, and the oppressive realities of wealth accumulation being prioritized over human dignity and well being.

We are in a historic moment of reckoning for both this nation and this faith—a time of unveiling and unraveling.

There is a stark reality we are faced with in our time, and it has many layers, and we live in those layers and we help to shape those layers.

This stark reality is impossible not to see on some of these layers, on others it is harder for many to accept that what ails us has infected our root systems and not just some of the branches.

This nation and this faith have so long been co-opted by agendas and power grabs that have very little to do with “We the People” that for many who live in this land God and country are the rallying cry for things like mass deportation, mass incarceration, misogynistic policies and laws that keep women from access to health care and put control of women’s bodies in the hands of courts and politicians. God and country for many are the rallying cry for banning books, for banning drag, and for banning healthcare for our LGBTQIA+ siblings. And for many God and country is an incomplete sentence without the word “guns.” In fact, “God, Guns, Country” is one of the taglines on Trump 2024 yard signs.

This distorted and dangerous entanglement of nation and faith with violence, racism, misogyny, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia—it’s scary and it’s real, and we must take it seriously. But that’s the obvious layer—that’s the layer that is so stark and horrendous that it takes all our attention sometimes—and sometimes it keeps us from really unpacking the more concealed layer of how progressive Christians and liberal Americans are tangled up in the things that make and keep us sick as a people.

This fall at GCPC we are continuing our intentional work to not ignore and not perpetuate and not exacerbate these harder to see layers of how “We the People” in this nation and this faith got kidnapped by white supremacy capitalism and colonizing empire. We are continuing to do the work, the hard and healing work of surfacing how we have

internalized the lies of supremacy and accumulation and power hoarding and perfectionism and either/or thinking and ... you can fill in the blanks—we've been at this for a while now—the ideas, the concepts, the words, the analysis is something we talk about every week. And that will continue.

The most important layer of our work is the practice—the practice, practice, practice that guides and fuels the process of healing and transformation and mutual liberation. Our exploration of “We the People” is not an intellectual journey—although our curiosity and our intellect will be engaged, but our “We the People” exploration is embodied and spiritual—it is about our souls—the souls of each of us, and the soul of our community. Who are we if we are serious about “We the People”--the elemental realities of “We the People”?

The Book of James is a great place for us to start this “We the People” journey.

Whoever wrote James evokes only his identity as a servant of God and Jesus, but he does not really talk about Jesus much at all. We have no way of knowing who actually wrote this book. There are lots of James mentioned in the New Testament. “James, the brother of the Lord,” or Jesus’ half brother was the most well known who still would have been alive to write this or to have been believed to have written it. He was a known faithful leader among the Jesus followers in Jerusalem, and finally lost his life, legend has it, on his knees praying for the people. He prayed so much for the people that his knees were calloused. And he was praying when his public execution by stoning occurred. But exegetically, that’s bible scholar talk for the study of the bible, there is no clear line connecting this Book to Jesus’ actual half brother. But that’s probably what the early church fathers wanted us to believe and many have operated as if it is true.

For our purposes, who wrote this book does not matter as much as what this person wrote.

Mia read the passage today from The Message translation—a vivid version of a powerful diatribe about the ways the early Christian movement was already struggling with being coopted by the social stratification of the larger culture.

James’ main focus in this book is about how following Jesus should disrupt and erase the social conventions that socialized people to be deferential to the wealthy and to mistreat, exclude and shame those who were financially impoverished. When he talks about partiality, that’s what he is talking about: favoring the financially resources and disadvantaging those without financial resources.

James is speaking to all the Jesus followers of his day—those creating communities of diverse identities. And his big concern is how they are being bamboozled by the things

empire has taught them at the expense of the things Jesus taught them. For James, it's actually not just what Jesus taught them, it's what their Creator God taught them. For James it is not about conformity to doctrine as much as it is about ethics—the way you live, the way you treat other people, the way you build communities and relationships.

You can't just talk about faith, you have to do something to embody your faith. You can't just pray, you have to embody your faith in actions. You can't say you are faithful and still prioritize the habits and norms of the larger culture.

James is saying that collectives of believers must distinguish themselves in how they do things, not just in what they say. Amen to that! But he is saying more than that. He is also saying, wake up!! Don't you see who it is that is hurting you, who it is that is breaking trust, breaking relationship, distorting the community's ways of being together—it's not those without financial resources, it's those with high wealth who want to keep it all for themselves—they are the ones taking you to court, they are the ones paying you low wages, they are the ones exacerbating the suffering in the streets.

If only the Founding Fathers of this nation had foregrounded James' diatribe when they dreamed up our Constitution and our Declaration of Independence. But when you know the true history of our founding, it makes sense that they didn't. The earliest European settlers in this land were wealthy Corporations with a business model that included the conquest of land and the securing of the cheapest labor possible.

Early on in colonial Maryland and Virginia, the wealthy landowning class realized that pitting the working class against each other was the surest path to them accumulating the most wealth, and that is where the legal category of "white" was born. And that is when "white" and "supremacy" became wedded with each other as an American ideal and a cover for unbridled greed to be the core impulse of an infant country.

When you know the truth about the core value of wealth accumulation at the heart of America's birth story, then you know that this was never a Christian nation. A truly Christian nation would never have put the accumulation of wealth as the driving force and the map to set the course of the future. If our country was founded on Christian values, it would have centered the mandate of God's centering of those who are impoverished as the leading edge of how we all get free.

The Book of James has been a favorite of liberation theology because it so clearly spells out God's preferential option for those who are financially impoverished.

“We the People” at GCPC is a Spirit-led experiment to see what emerges when we center the work of detoxing from white supremacy and colonized Christianity. Can we truly embody “We the People” by both provoking justice and transformation in the public square and in our own structures and systems AND by taking good care of each other consistently and in a way we can all begin to trust and engage in fully?

These are the questions, Grace Covenant, that inhabit these three words, “We the People.” Together can we practice? Together can we catch glimpses? Together can we taste and see that God made us for the mercy that will always win out over judgment?

Worship is the centrifuge of our practice together. And so we can’t get distracted by all the low hanging fruit around us that keep us from doing our own work. It’s easy to blame others for what ails us. It’s harder to tell the truth about how we have colluded and participated and internalized the things that are killing us all.

Jesus, the great companion on the road to liberation where everyone is free, he calls us to come and see for ourselves.

Come as you are and bring all that you carry.

Come hungry and come honest.

Come thirsty and come with an open heart.

It’s ok if you are not sure what this means for you. This table is not set for certainty, it is set for sustaining us on this healing journey we are on together.

The feast is ready and there is place for you and for me.

Thanks be to God.

Can we provoke justice while also realizing that to change the world, we have to change?