

**St John United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Barbara Lohrbach**  
**October 1, 2006**

**James 5:13-20      It Makes a Difference**

James is an epistle, a letter written to 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christians in Palestine. In this lesson everyday needs are addressed, envisioning a community where people suffer and pray, rejoice and sing, become sick and get well, sin and receive forgiveness. We do pretty well identifying with suffering and prayer to relieve that suffering, with rejoicing and singing out of our joy, with becoming sick and getting well, but sin...that's not so easy.

Three preachers were on a fishing trip when they began to discuss various topics to pass the time. One preacher said he thought it would be nice if they confessed their biggest sins to each other and then prayed for each other. They all agreed, and the first preacher said that his biggest sin was that he liked to sit at the beach now and then and watch pretty women stroll by. The second preacher confessed that his biggest sin was that he went to the horse racing track every so often and put a bet on a horse. Turning to the third preacher, they asked, "Brother, what is your biggest sin?" With a big grin, he said, "My biggest sin is gossiping."

Sin is not a popular subject. No one truly wants to think that we could possibly be that bad. So we talk about guilty feelings and tell people not to cry, that it really doesn't matter, sometimes even convincing ourselves that our failures don't matter. But it does matter, it really matters a lot.

Part of the problem is in the defining, and I believe I can safely say that no two people in this space today have the same definition of sin. Here's a definition as a starting point: Sin—a realistic sense of the capacity for both evil and virtue that resides in the human heart. That is a description of sin that is workable, useful and healthy and that definition by the way comes from the writings of 4th century monks. Since we have this capacity for both evil and virtue, how do we resist one and encourage the other?

Kathleen Norris in "A Cloister Walk" found an answer in the writings of another monk, Gregory of Nyssa. She writes:

"Human beings are part of the creation that God called good. Sin, then, is an aberration, not natural to us at all. This is why Gregory of Nyssa speaks so often of 'returning to the grace of that image which was established in

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you from the beginning.’ Gregory, in fact, saw it as our lifelong task to find out what part of the divine image God has chosen to reveal in us. He and other early monks suggest that we can best do this by realistically determining how God has made us—what our primary faults and temptations are, as well as our gifts—not that we might “feel good about ourselves,” but that we might become instruments of divine grace for other people, and eventually return to God.

The tragedy of sin is that it diverts divine gifts. The person who has a genuine capacity for loving becomes promiscuous, maybe sexually, or may be becoming frivolous and fickle, afraid to make a commitment to anyone or anything. The person with a gift for passionate intensity squanders it in angry tirades and, given power, becomes a demagogue.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words to be good, not just feel good, we need to know who we are as created in God’s image and what the gifts are that God has given us. I would be willing to bet if I were a betting person that most of us could rattle off our faults. Can we name our gifts?

Just in case you missed this part—it’s a life-long process. And that, my dear friends, is why I believe that the church is needed today more than ever. That’s why I believe that having a place where we wrestle with who we are as God’s creation matters. It makes a difference.

The writer of James knew that as well. The words remind us of the importance of being in relationship with one another and sharing this life-long process, praying with and for one another. We are accountable for the way in which we live our lives. We need one another to hold each of us accountable. And we need one another to offer forgiveness and cover the multitude of sins.

If we do not hold people accountable for their actions, how can we face the abused child?

If we do not hold one another accountable for the addictions that change us, how can we face those most affected by the addictive behaviors?

If we do not hold governments and leaders accountable for the decisions they make on our behalf, how we can face the poor and neglected among us?

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 127.

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Today we participate in the rituals of the church. These rituals are not unlike the rituals of everyday life...the cleansing wash of water, eating and drinking for nourishment. Rituals are important. They give us a sense of identity and purpose.

These sacred rituals of baptism and communion are our identity as Christians. At the font of baptism we acknowledge that we are created in the image of God and that we know that image best in Jesus. We claim our identity as ones who intend to follow Jesus. We become members of the community of those who follow Jesus known as Christians. We come to the font once in our lives to be baptized for it is God, through water and spirit who baptizes.

At the table of communion, we remember our baptism. At the table of communion, we are re-membered into the community of our baptism, the community of those who follow Jesus all around the world. At this table, we learn how to eat at every table. We come often to this table to remember Jesus and to be re-membered into the body of Christ.

This table is ready for those who love the Lord and for those who want to love him more. This table is ready for those who have much faith and those who have little. This table is ready for those who have been here often and those who have not been here long. This table is ready for those who have tried to follow and for those who have failed. At this table, we are welcome because God, known to us in Jesus the Christ, makes the invitation.

Thanks be to God.