

James calls us to be “doers of the word and not hearers only.” And he has some very definite ideas about what we need to do to live a Christian life. “Give to those in need,” is one. But we shouldn’t hear that only as an admonition, a demand, it’s also an invitation, an opportunity, a gift even.

What image do you most remember of the tragedy of September 11, 2001? Surely, it’s the horror of those huge towers collapsing. It’s indelibly fixed in our minds. We saw it over and over.

What we didn’t see so much and so don’t remember as well is the huge, spontaneous outpouring of generosity in response to the tragedy.

In New York there was a great outpouring of giving. People stood in line for hours to give blood. They brought food, clothes, and toiletries. The agencies couldn’t handle it all; they were overwhelmed by the generosity.

Everyone wanted to give! This giving, this huge outpouring of generosity, is us at our best.

Airplanes slamming into the towers, then the towers collapsing – that’s humanity at its worst. That’s about as low as we can sink.

But people standing in line to give blood, baking pies for rescue workers – that’s us at our best. Too bad that image didn’t stick with us – generous human response to very inhuman acts.

The human spirit at its best wants to give, to counter evil with good.

That’s what people wanted to do after September 11. So on fences and walls near the site they put up teddy bears, favorite photos, love poems, all as memorials to the missing.

“Give to those in need.” That’s what people sought to do, with a generosity that was overwhelming.

This creative response to evil, this giving, is us at our most human, and our most divine. It’s us being the “image of God” we were meant to be, representing God’s care to one another.

God is a giver. What God does is give – give and give and give. God gives “to those in need,” which is all of us, every day, no matter how disappointing, hurtful, stubborn, arrogant, or evil we’ve been. God keeps on giving, all we need for life, and more, - love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness - because God keeps loving, keeps hoping for the best from us, no matter what. God keeps giving, freely, abundantly, because God, as Jesus said, wants us “to have life, and have it abundantly.

When we’re at our most human and most divine, that’s how we give, freely, generously, out of love, so that others, person or group, friend or enemy, might have life, and have it abundantly.”

Unfortunately, we’re not always able to be so fully human and divine. We learn that withholding our giving is an effective way to express anger, to take vengeance, to hurt. So, that’s what we do. A person or group, disappoints, or angers us, makes a decision we don’t agree with, and we stop giving.

We withhold our gifts – our presence, time, talent, or treasure. Whether we’re actually trying to hurt them or just cutting them out of our lives doesn’t matter. We’re showing that our will, our desire for them, is not abundant life, not wholeness, but struggle, pain, destruction.

When we give, we’re wishing life; when we withhold, we’re wishing death. The giving or withholding of our selves, of our gifts, has to do with giving or withholding life.

It all goes back to creation story. God made something out of nothing. Then, after creating an

awesome world, in a last, awesome act, God creates humanity. God gives humanity a lush garden, puts it in their care. Then God tells them that they have something to give, in order to sustain life. “Now it’s your turn,” says God. And God trusts them to give, as God has given, so life may flourish.

All too often, humans have grasped or withheld, rather than given. Events like September 11 remind us of the mess we’ve made of what’s been put in our care. Human history could be read as one long record of our despoiling the beautiful world God entrusted to us.

But human history can also be seen as an effort to give back some of the goodness God’s given us. We’re not only destroyers, we’re also creators, not only takers or withholders, but givers. Our art, music, architecture, and poetry are all attempts to give something back.

That can be true with all we’ve been given. We all live with ambiguity in regarding “stuff.” Some of us pay too high a price for our stack of it, sacrificing health, families, and friends, because we’re so anxious about it. What can we do about this over-accumulation, over-striving, and over-work?

The church says that we can bring it all here. We can share what we’ve been given as an expression of gratitude to the one who so abundantly gives to us in our need, every day. We can give our time, our talents, our treasure, to God’s praise and work. We can attend a class, sing or play in a choir, usher, read, or greet. We can all make a financial offering.

We can take that very ambiguous stuff called money – the root of so much evil, source of so much good – and put it on the altar. By so doing, we can redeem our daily work. What we’re doing when we share the offering is having our lives transformed from merely making a living to living a life. We can take whatever we do for a living, and begin to do it for God’s glory and the good of others. What we bring to the altar can be us at our best! We can take the stuff of our daily lives and give it back to God for God’s work. That’s us at our best!

Because it’s an opportunity to give, the offering is an invitation to be our best.

The day after September 11, there was a spectacular outpouring of generosity and goodness. Millions of dollars were given. It was appropriate, and it was beautiful.

But that’s what happens every week in the church! What for some was a special, generous one-time act was a typical Sunday here at church. Every week, no matter how earnestly we praise God, or how much we’re lifted above the cares of our daily lives, there’s always a time when we say something like, “Let us worship God with our tithes and offerings.” That’s where our religious words are made real and worship becomes relevant to daily life. That’s where our little lives begin to count for something and we stand against the selfishness and vindictiveness that’s so destructive. We give!

We do it out of habit, without thinking much about it. Maybe that’s how it ought to be, for that’s one of the purposes of the church – to make us givers – givers of time, talent, and treasure - because we love, because we wish abundant life for one another, our whole faith family, and God’s whole creation, just as God wishes abundant life for us, even when we’ve sinned. We’re to come to love like God, so much that giving becomes so natural that we don’t think much about it. We simply give!

This is you and me at our Christian, divine and human best. Then, we can trust our Lord to say, “Well done, good and faithful servants; you have been doers of the Word, and not hearers only.

HYMN – *For the Fruit of All Creation*

PRAYER

Lord, when we consider all the good gifts that you have given us
– our lives, this beautiful world, our beloved friends and family, our possessions, our health –
...what can we say but “thanks”?

We don't consider your gifts as often as we ought, we confess,
...because something within us likes to look upon who we are and what we have as our possessions,
...our achievements rather than as your gifts.

We love that little word “mine” and we use it to delude ourselves.

Forgive us Lord, for overlooking and for taking for granted your gifts.

Most of all, help us to discover the great power you have given us to be givers.

Help us experience some of your graciousness and creativity in the gifts that we give to others.

Make us joyful, cheerful givers when it comes to sharing our time, talent, and treasure.

When things are difficult or disappointing, help us not to withhold, not to wish death,
...but like you, to give, and give, out of love, and a desire for life in all it's abundance,
...even for those who frustrate or anger us.

Thank you, God of giving, for granting another hour, another moment, in which we may serve you.

Thank you, God of caring, that we might once more become your partner.

You no longer call us servants but friends, and as your family we seek to share in your inheritance,
...which is your desire to lift up the fallen, sustain the struggling, strengthen the weak,
...speak honestly to the proud and mighty, and proclaim your kingdom.

Thank you once more for this opportunity which we take hold of with holiness.

O God, in this harried world of multitasking, with its blending of screech and scrawl,
...we offer you this time of silence.

Speak with us, and for us, as we listen in peace.

(Silence)

We pray now, in your name we pray, for those known to us with special needs.
Amen.