

All That We Are: Lessons from Geese

James 1:17-27

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"My faith demands – *this is not optional* – that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference." These are words of Jimmy Carter, who (at age 95) is now the eldest-ever former President of the USA. Carter is also a 2002 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Professor at Emory University in Atlanta, and founder of the Carter Center – an organization for which he works tirelessly doing humanitarian work in the charitable realm such as eradication of poverty and disease around the globe. Carter has been in the news fairly often in recent months due to a number of medical concerns. However, he still teaches Sunday School every other week at Mirantha Baptist church, in Plains, GA, totaling more than 800 lessons since leaving the Whitehouse. It is interesting that so much of the coverage of the life of this man [who was once the most powerful person in the world] lifts up his unrelenting dedication to good works.

Jimmy Carter has never hesitated to connect his commitments to the gospel itself, because *what he does* flows out of *what he believes*. He is an example of what today's Scripture passage defines as "doers and not just hearers of the word," as he has worked on behalf of the most vulnerable members of our community.

Many biblical scholars identify the author of the book of James as Jesus' brother who is thought to be writing to people in the early churches living in the diaspora – (the areas outside of Palestine). James gives a series of imperatives that punctuate the entire book in an effort to provide instruction and implant wisdom in his "beloved children" who are striving to figure out what it means to follow Jesus and to be a community.

In today's verses, I see three main parts of James' message.

First, we hear a reminder to focus on **God as the source of all acts of giving, as well as the gifts themselves**. Having such a focus can help us cultivate for ourselves a sense of gratitude because God gave us life, and considers us a kind of first fruits. First Fruits are a religious offering of the first agricultural produce of the harvest. In classical Greek, Roman, Hebrew and Christian religions, the first fruits were given to priests to offer to God. Therefore, the original hearers of this message would likely have understood James to mean that we, as humans, and are the best of God's creation. James establishes that his readers are God's "first fruits" before giving imperatives to guide their personal morals and behavior. That is to say, James is compelling the people that as an offering to God - they are to *help others*.

It seems that James was compelling those Christians living in the diaspora to persist in moral living, bearing fruit as intended by their Creator, even in their challenging environment. James pointed out that it is possible to do so because of a God who is, day by day, continuing to bless God's people. God does this with a word that calls the people to a new way of living.

The second main part of the message is that we are being called not only to hear God's word, but to also live out God's word. New Testament scholar Douglas Moo writes, "We are not just to walk away mumbling 'how interesting' or to only use God's word as a source of intellectual stimulation and

academic debate." Instead, we are "to care for orphans and widows in their distress." Orphans and widows can be taken literally, and can also be taken as those that are vulnerable, weak or in distress among us. The truth is that we all have times in our lives when we are vulnerable, weak or in distress. It is in these times that we must rely on others in our community, just as there are times when we are to be the ones to help others.

The third part of our passage today adds an imperative that is perhaps the most difficult: "to keep oneself unstained by the world." In order to keep oneself "unstained," it perhaps requires us to change our way of seeing things and our way of thinking. We are to conform our whole lives around God's word, not to the world around us. That is to say: out of gratitude for being the beloved of God, and as the first fruits of God's creation, we are to let our very lives be transformed.

How can we best understand this imperative? Let us consider theologian Karl Rahner's suggestion that we are not to simply "**be**" Christians, as if such a transformation could happen in an instant. Rather, it should be our lifelong hope to "**become**" Christians in an ongoing and daily pursuit. We can think of James' instructions, and (in fact) all of those pastoral efforts of the epistles to provide guidance for daily life, as words of wisdom for the long journey we share. Are we open to have our thinking re-programmed by the word of God? Are we open to having our way of seeing things perhaps turned around, day by day? In many ways our thinking has been programmed by the world around us. How has the world's programming worked out in our lives? Is it coherent with the gospel? We might ask the question a different way: what does the gospel value most, and what does our culture value most? And, are they the same thing?

I will offer a story as in illustration, with the hope that our thinking may be transformed by the hearing... so that we can get to the "do-ing" part. In other words, I hope it will help us make the transition from being God's beloved to the action of **being** love **to** others around us.

The Goose

This is my Goose.

At least I say he's mine.

I suppose he is for a time.

He's been injured, you see, and for a little while he's staying with me.

He has no Eagle claw, nor furrowed brow, nor hooked beak.

Of these he has no need

Because he's quite content to fill himself on little things amongst the weeds

Like small fish.

It's a dainty dish, if you're a Goose

Or a Swede.

But that is not to say, however, that he is weak and not strong like the Eagle.

For though the Eagle may be stronger in the fight and more fit for the kill,

This Goose will fly further and longer than any Eagle will.

Oh, I've heard much lofty talk about Eagles, Falcons and Hawks,
And it's not my desire, nor would I conspire to put those great birds down.
Who would dare?

In fact, when I see one flying so high, sometimes just a solitary dot in the sky,
I can but gaze and wonder...my gosh, look at that!

But, as I've implied, whether in trees or in the skies, Eagles, Falcons and Hawks are almost always
alone, or perhaps in twos.
And that's what separates those fine birds from this Goose.

I suppose those in Iowa or Nebraska would know it best, because they say the sky is bigger if you live
in the west, but even as a young girl growing up in the hills of New England I can recall looking forward
each Fall to seeing as many as a thousand geese arrowing into view over autumn ember elm, white
birch and maple, too.

Well, one day, while lying alone on my back, hearing only the moan and groan of a train on some
distant track, I saw above me a thousand feet or more, something which, I must say, to that day, I had
never seen before.

The head Goose, the leader of the v-e-e, suddenly swerved out, leaving a vacancy that was promptly
filled by the bird behind! The former leader then flew alongside the formation growing wide, and took
its place at the back of the line. And they never missed a beat!

Well, I was on my feet; gaping mouth, gazing south wondering, what have I seen? I ran to tell my
friends and they said "so-o-o-o?" And I said, "So-o-o? Have you ever seen anything like that Mark,
Judy Paul?" And they said "Nah. But don't be a bore. Let's got to the park and play ball." And so we
did. I used to play a lot of ball when I was a kid. And that was that.

Well, I'm an adult now, and I'm very busy. I suppose that's part of being grown. But the point is, I
almost never have time to spend alone. Not the least lying on my back looking for geese!

Oh, I might see one, but it's more or less luck. Or, I might see a Goose, but it's really a duck. Or I
might catch a glimpse when I'm caught in traffic. And that's why I'm thankful for the national
geographic! Because they told me what I now tell you.

You see, what I witnessed that day as a child is something that's been going on in the wild since the
very first autumn, the very first spring. You see, their bodies are streamlined, necks like a spear,
slicing the wind, cutting the air. And although from the ground it's impossible to see, those wings
aren't just flapping randomly!

When the lead Goose grabs the wind, air is displaced, which promptly rushes up again to reclaim its
space, only to greet the smiling face of the bird that's flying behind—whose wings are in the
downward position; a very precarious position; but it doesn't last for long! Because the upward rush
gives them a push and they're right back up there where they belong. Then that Goose grabs the wind
and passes it to the bird behind, and so it goes on down the line.

So the lead bird breaks the wind, and all the rest are more or less carried by him, or her, in varying degrees, of course, from the back, which is best, to the front which is worst, with very little effort, I'm told, on the part of any one Goose. For when the lead Goose has had enough, it simply falls back, and relies on another bird for strength, when strength is what it lacks.

So that's how I found out how this Goose can fly from way up north, to way down south, and back again! But it cannot do it alone, you see. It's something that must be done in community.

Oh, I know it's a popular notion and people swell with pride and emotion when they think of themselves like the Eagle: brave, self-confident, independent. Not bad traits... but ones which are, perhaps, stained by the world. I think our lesson from today's Scripture lesson from James is: **God made us more like the Goose.** To be love for one another, in community. May it be so, Amen.

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