

James 2:1-8, 14-17
“ONA Alive!”
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
Third Sunday after Pentecost, Open & Affirming Sunday,
June 26, 2022

The Reading:

James 2:1-8, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or ‘Sit at my feet’, ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Let me reread one of the longer sentences within our RCC Open and Affirming statement: “We welcome and encourage persons of every sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, ethnicity, race, age, nationality, and economic circumstance, marital status, and physical, and mental ability to join fully in the life and ministry of the Roslindale Congregational Church, United Church of Christ.” There are twelve categories of inclusion and affirmation named here.

They didn’t call it this in James’ time, but he told the readers of his letter that the church was to be open and affirming of a multiplicity of persons. You could say that the nature of the Church is to be ONA!

James, the author, may have been the brother of Jesus, and if so, would’ve written this collection of moral essays in letterform within the first generation of the Church. He was not writing to a particular congregation in a specific locale, but to all Christians everywhere in general.

When I claim that James described the Church as “open and affirming,” I mean that he exhorts believers to treat others, especially the poor and the lowest on the economic ladder, with honor, respect, and neighbor love. There were different social classes represented in the assembly, but the Church was not to show partiality or to favor the wealthy and not to look down upon the already downtrodden. In fact, he paints a vivid scene where the greeter does this very thing – fawning over the one with social status and relegating the homeless man to standing room only. So the church of James’ time was most challenged by the category of “economic circumstance” in our ONA statement. That’s what *they* needed to work on.

James holds up the teaching and behavior of Jesus Christ. When he refers to the blessed name that was invoked over them, he’s referring to Jesus Christ. When he talks about their ethical behavior, he quotes Jesus’ teaching about loving our neighbors as ourselves. The writer **affirms that all human beings have sacred worth and are worthy of the full, equal, non-partial compassion of the Church.** The song we sing comes to mind: “We will guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride, and they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Furthermore, James says that it is not enough to be “open.” The church must be “affirming.” “What good is it,” he writes, “if someone who is hungry and naked comes to church and you say ‘Be well. Have faith. Go on your way. We’re praying for you,’ but you don’t give them food, clothes, or shelter?! **We are to go the second mile of faith in action. Doing makes faith alive!**

Maybe you already see the connections between the reading from James and being an open and affirming church today. We have the same ONA DNA as church today, all twelve categories (and probably others), **so we are not only to be open, but affirm LGBTQ+ persons – sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and gender expression. All need active affirmation.**

It is relatively easy for you and me to live this faith conviction ‘up in our heads,’ or to make a decision in 2016 and then rest on our laurels. If we do nothing intentional and special for the well being of members of the LGBTQ+ community, then we will still be back in the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell era. Christ calls you and me *not* only to say: “We love everybody,” or “as long as you don’t have an agenda or rock the boat.” These sentiments might still be “open,” but not actively “affirming.” **ONA beliefs need to be practiced, accompanied by deeds, in order to be worth it and alive.**

The current state of LGBTQ+ persons in our society *especially* calls for active affirmation and solidarity. Over the last year, LGBTQ+ rights have been eroding. Anti-gay and Anti-trans rhetoric and legislation has been on the rise, from Florida’s “Don’t say Gay” bill, to banning Trans student athletes, to accusing parents of abuse who exercise the right to help their gender-variant children obtain appropriate health care. We also don’t know how the Supreme Court is going to challenge settled law. So active affirmation and advocacy on our part is necessary if we truly desire to love our neighbor as ourselves! I’m not talking “politics” here; I am speaking of *faith* in action. We must stand up, support, and carry out social/spiritual action.

You know, they say that if you love your work, you’ll never work a day in your life! Works invigorate our faith. Active affirmation and advocacy energizes the dead

places in us. When you help someone else, *you* become alive. **RCC can become ONA Alive!**”

I have an exercise – an action step – with which to close the sermon today. If you will take out your bulletin insert, the backside of our statement with the picture of the people...see the lead sentence there... I am asking you to consider what ONA action step you will embark upon this summer. Please read the three types of active affirmation... choose at least one... and fill in the blank with what you will *do*. Take time to consider, commit, and write it down today. Now.

Hold onto it. During the prayer of dedication for the offering, I will invite you to hold up your promise and consecrate it before God.