



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, September 24, 2006
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Saint James 1:19-27
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“THE LAW OF LIBERTY”

When Saint James writes of *the law of liberty*, he puts before us a phrase we should find paradoxical. There is about liberty that which does away with law. At least in the culture of late capitalism, liberty is understood as the unfettered choice of individual consumers, choice which is exercised free of external restraints. We who live and move in this culture cannot help but think of liberty and law as in tension with each other: law is what limits my freedom, and liberty happens when I am able to express myself free from any outer compulsion.

Now our culture may not hold its understanding of liberty with profundity. It is, in fact, not hard to ridicule the notion of the autonomous individual claiming personal freedom and standing boldly against each and every external force, the individual who has chosen for himself or herself and chosen all by himself or herself to buck all traditions and be free . . . and who wears exactly the same clothes, and has exactly the same hairstyle, as everyone else. This bold individualist often has chucked one set of conformities only to adopt another: a common personal image shrewdly packaged by our omnipresent visual media. Oh yes, I have indulged this rhetoric myself, and it is delicious rhetoric, this cultural critique. But something about it doesn't taste right, and there has remained for me a nagging question.

The question arises from reflection on experience; that, indeed, the goal of life with regard to most laws is to transcend them. A quick image, once told to me on I do not know what authority: Bach, in his classroom, teaching many students the rules that must be followed in the composition of music, then leaves the classroom and enters his study where he proceeds to break all the rules. Individuality, creativity, yea freedom, seems to involve not the rejection of rules but the moving beyond them. Laws seem to be there as things we must learn and then go beyond. They are things we need in our growing up; but the mature human being has graduated from school, has internalized and transcended the laws that bound him in his youth. Is not Jesus our model in this, Jesus who was obedient in everything and who yet went beyond anything that had ever been done?

So is not this the paradox in James telling us to look into *the perfect law*, as he states, *the law of liberty*: he says, *the perfect law*, and the word *perfect* means something that is at its end, something that is complete and fulfilled: he says, *the perfect law*, and in that phrase “law” is not something that is surpassed or gone beyond; law is there at the end, law *is* the end. It seems to me that this is a paradox native to authentic Christian thought. We know *that* it is the case while at the same time we cannot understand *how* it is the case, that law and liberty are wed together in such a way that neither leaves the other behind. When we try to make one superior to the other we see that it does not work: law without liberty and liberty without law are both disasters. But in the face of our experience

of the tension between them, the hanging together of law and liberty, even to the end, even to the very being of God himself (who is free and at the same time supremely lawful): this we cannot understand.

Our problem, as James also suggests, is forgetfulness. We tend to talk a Christian line while failing so greatly to live a Christian life. Such an internal disconnect within a Christian person—trying to have “faith” without “works,” which we all do—is described by James in a perplexing simile. *If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he looks like.* Is this, I wonder, some chasm of cultural difference? For when I look around me (and when I look into my heart), I see lots of preening for the mirror. We look in the mirror all the time, and boy do we work hard to make that look count. Is my hair the way I want it? Are my clothes properly arrayed? Do I have spinach between my teeth? What is the impression I’m making? (Impressions are highly important!) Thus we continually look in mirrors, we think about mirrors; how can James say that when we walk away we *at once forget what [we] look like*?

Nor does this strike me as a modern problem (although the wealth and glitter of New York certainly expands the options before us). In the ancient pagan world we have Narcissus, so captivated by his image that he would not leave the pool where he could see it; the gods turned him into the flower that bears his name. And in the ancient Hebrew world there is the eloquent voice of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, where we read *Vanity, vanity, all is vanity*: a summons to righteousness that would lose much of its punch if we all kept forgetting what we look like.

Yet James, who probably knew the myth of Narcissus and surely knew Ecclesiastes, nonetheless states as a common truth that we look at our reflection and then walk away and forget what we saw. How can this be?

I have a suggestion for an answer. Often lately, it seems, when I look in a mirror I have something of a surprise. The surprise has to do with wrinkles and hair color. (Who is that old guy in the mirror looking back at me?) The things I forget are the things which in our culture are considered blemishes. The image of myself that I remember, the image of myself that I carry around with me, is of someone much closer to a cultural ideal. Now let’s use that experience as a sign of a spiritual reality. When I look into myself, if I look honestly, I will see many spiritual blemishes. These are deformations of my soul, some of them wounds caused by others, many of them self-inflicted. I would rather think of myself as, basically, spiritually unblemished. Oh, I might need to go on a little diet, do a little more exercise than I have been doing, but (so I fantasize) there’s nothing about me that’s in need of radical treatment.

Occasionally we look into our souls, but then we walk away and forget what we saw, and go on living, as if everything were just fine.

Theology has words for this phenomenon: creation, fall, redemption. The fall means that there are truths about God that we can apprehend *are true* but we cannot understand *how* it is that they are true. One such truth is that God himself is *the perfect law, the law of liberty*. Redemption means that Christ has set us free from our true enslavement (which is not to the law, but to sin and death). Thus we can hold fast to the promise that someday we will be able to gaze profoundly into that perfect *law of liberty*, someday we will be able to gaze deeply into God himself.

In the meantime, as James says, it is good to do concrete acts of love. May I urge you this week to comfort someone who is afflicted. It won’t make you a perfect Christian, but it is a good thing to do.