

**Blind to the Truly Profane**  
First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Gloversville, New York  
September 6, In the Year of Our LORD, 2009  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

James 2:1-17 and Mark 7:31-37

The year is 1930 and in her book, “The Murder at the Vicarage,” Agatha Christie introduces one of her more notable characters, Miss Jane Marple. The tale is recounted by the Vicar, the local clergyman. Early in the tale, a Colonel Protheroe, in his capacity as magistrate, expressing his insistence on “justice” has this exchange of words with the pastor:

“Firmness,” [Colonel Pretheroe] shouted in his stentorian voice ... that’s what needed nowadays – firmness! Make an example. We’re too lax nowadays! I believe in showing a man up for what he is. ... It’s all the same to me – no matter what a man is – doctor, lawyer, clergyman, poacher, drunken wastrel – if you catch him on the wrong side of the law, let the law punish him. You agree with me, I’m sure.”

“I was thinking,” [the Vicar] said, “that, when my time comes, I should be sorry if the only plea I might offer was that of justice. Because it might mean that only justice would be meted out to me.”

I am not going to tell you “who done it,” but I *am* going to tell you that the Vicar, I, and anyone else who reads this tale, sheds few tears when, since Agatha Christie is determined to “knock someone off” in her books, it is Colonel Pretheroe that is “sent packing.” At this point we might wonder: when this fictional magistrate faced the Almighty, did he receive his beloved justice, devoid of any mercy, or did he receive the grace for which we pray as brothers and sisters in the Christian faith! When I last read that book by Agatha Christie, I was reading today’s passages of Scripture from the lectionary and was immediately struck by the parallel to the words from James we heard read this morning:

For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. – James 2:13

But then, stated in his words, that is exactly what the Vicar said to Colonel Pretheroe! The miracle of Jesus healing the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment reminds us that when you and I gather in worship, pray to the Almighty, and do all else to be in touch with the Divine, we seek to have our ears unstopped, our eyes opened and our speech amended so that what we experience, what we say and what we do is *of – as in accomplished on behalf of* our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God.

The conclusion is pretty obvious – and a Yale Divinity School Professor, Halford Luccock put it better than any other. Rather than paraphrase – or worse plagiarize – his words, hear them as he composed them in 1950. How sad that nearly sixty years later they are just as timely as when first composed!

The miracles of Jesus, in all their variety, are richly suggestive of transformations which come in a life when Christ enters as ... Savior. Here, Jesus heals a deaf man: restores his hearing. It carries the mind along to that even larger ministry of making the mind and heart more sensitive to the voices of God and of the world. How many of the ills of the earth are due largely to the spiritual deafness of those who cannot hear the “still, sad music of humanity” of the “still small voice” of God. They are too deaf to hear the sobs of grief, whether across the seas, or across the railroad tracks, or across the street. They are too hard of hearing to catch the rumble of discontent over injustice, or to discern the thunder of coming storms.

On the fifth anniversary of 9/11, ABC and CBS prepared documentaries about the events of that day and the aftermath. The work of both networks caused some controversy. More than a few former public officials believe the ABC mini-series fictionalized some of their dialogue and that the writers of the mini-series put words in their mouths they did not utter. There are some who contend CBS should have deleted the foul language from recordings of rescuers, the rescued, and the un-rescued.

Not surprisingly, some of the language is profane. Perhaps that is because the terrorist attack was profane, demeaning of human life and demeaning of all that is holy. Later, the Discovery Channel presented a documentary on 9/11 told by eyewitnesses that managed to find a good balance, projecting the profanity of the terrorist act while “bleeping out” the foul words. A quick lesson: “profane” comes from “pro” (before – or outside) and “fanum” (temple). To be “outside the temple,” to be outside what is holy and sacred is, profane. Whatever is not sacred, is instead secular, impious, and shows contempt or irreverence toward God or sacred things is profane. A good synonym is to be “blasphemous.”

I do not defend the use of profane words. I do, however, question those who complain about profane verbiage but say *nothing* of so much else that is profane. Like the man in Jesus’ miracle whose ears were unstopped and his speech improved, we need to hear messages like the one in the reading from James that insists it is unholy to show preferences (the example used is favoring the rich over the poor) and that one’s faith is on shaky ground if it is nothing but words without corresponding behavior. Hear James’ stinging rebuke:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 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?

Knowing there are many words in the English language that are profane, including four-letter words we try to eliminate from our vocabulary, I suggest there are other profound profanities to which we need to remove the blinders from our eyes, unstop our ears and for which we would loosen our tongues, free up our arms and hands, and open our wallets and checkbooks so that we might be part of solutions and not just people who expect others to accomplish God’s work.

Here is something profane: This past Friday, September 4, the Associated Press reported that:

Nearly 20% of Americans over 65 would be considered poor if the government updates the way it calculates poverty, which hasn’t considered medical costs, regional variations and other factors since its creation in 1955. Currently, the poverty rate for that age group is 9.7%, or 3.6 million people. If the government adopts a revised formula by the

[National Academy of Sciences](#), that figure would jump to 18.6% — 6.8 million people. ... Using the new formula, the Census Bureau calculated that the overall official poverty rate would rise, to roughly 15.3% from 12.5%. That works out to about 45.7 million Americans.

Here is some additional if not all the more *real* profanity:

- hatred,
- hunger, thirst and disease
- war,
- bias,
- judgmental attitudes,
- narrow readings of Scripture to justify exclusivity or in order to relegate “others” to hell

If the author of James and Agatha Christie urge mercy over unrelenting judgment, do we not hear an echo of calls for love over hatred, ministry and mission to those who know hunger, thirst and disease, reconciliation over war, openness and grace over bias and judgmental attitudes?

Are we not to find *profanity* in the statistic that there are nearly 46,000,000 poor people in this land – a country that can spend money to build or rebuild countries on other shores (which is admirable) but doesn’t sue its resources for its own people? A caveat: I am *not* an isolationist. I embrace the idea that we of the United States have a role to play in the world, but should there not be a debate on how resources are spent on high-tech weaponry instead of meeting basic human needs in this country *and* elsewhere, essentials like feeding hungry persons, providing clean water to everyone on the globe and sharing the marvels of modern medicine with tens of millions who are ravaged by diseases *for which there are cures*?

Yes, there are obstacles to curing the world’s ills. Some are so ingrained in the bureaucracies and convolutions of international relationships as to suggest we throw up our hands in despair. While the church needs to find a common voice through which to challenge those “powers and principalities,” there are also all too many personal evils that suggest our eyes and ears are shut and our voices are mute to the problems of the world. It is easy to paint evil as some incredible, overarching power over which we have no control, that we are helpless. The problem that lies therein is a tacit permission to for us to not struggle with evil at all.

I return to Agatha Christie. In a much later novel, “The Pale Horse,” Detective-Inspector Lejeune speaks to the idea of evil. With the same profound insight Dame Christie attributed to Hercule Perot, Miss Jane Marple, Harley Quin and the pair Tommy and Tuppence, Lejeune, in a final commentary on another extraordinary case of murder, debates the source and power of evil. To the suggestion that evil has grand, sinister, almost superhuman, elements, Lejeune responds:

Evil is not something superhuman, it’s something less than human. [This] criminal is someone who want[ed] to be important, but never will be important, because he’ll always be less than a man.

Which brings us to the words of a Rabbi Gordon who wrote:

Love is not blind – it sees more, not less.

If we are to be fully human, that is humans who know, and live as though they know, that they are made in the image of the Almighty God, then we are called to be *more* not less. Love is not blind, love is not deaf, love is not insensitive. Instead, love tastes, smells, sees, hears, and touches more of the world. With new found sight and perhaps more than a little bit of divine hearing and speech therapy, we can take personal and mutual responsibility for being part of God's solutions in all arenas of life.

While calling persons and nations and powers to account, for there are indeed dos and don'ts in life, are we not to imitate God and be agents of mercy? Are we not to take our cues from how God met the profane of the world with the gift of an only begotten One, how Jesus unstopped the ears and mouth of the deaf and mute, how He met the profane of His day with a sacrifice on a cross, and how Christ invites us to be people of the Way, people of the Word, people who see and confront what is profane and evil, accept the mercy that tempers the judgment of a loving God and go forth into the world with opened eyes, unstopped ears and opened mouths, made whole and new by God ... so that we might be agents of change, agents of mercy, agents of a love that sees more, hears more, says more – and, yes, does more?

Amen.