

## “Prayer and Potatoes”

A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode  
The Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 6, 2009

Scripture: James 2:1-10; 14-17

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Gracious God, here we are waiting to be taught. Here we are waiting to know, even as we are known. Move in the midst of us this day, we pray, and move us to become greater disciples. Amen.*

This may come as a surprise to you, but the only magazine to which I have subscribed on a continuous basis for the last forty years is the Readers’ Digest. When I am between books, when I have a doctor’s appointment and need some light reading, or when I am floating in our pool and don’t want to get the book I am reading wet, it is to the Readers’ Digest that I turn.

Several years ago, there was an article in the Readers’ Digest called “Mama Hale and Her Little Angels.” The article told about a woman named Clara Hale who at the time was 79 years old. She was a tiny, birdlike woman with nut-brown skin and a curling halo of white hair. The article was introduced with the following words:

“The baby will not stop screaming. On the fifth floor of a brownstone in New York City’s Harlem, a woman holds the two-week-old infant in her arms. The little body trembles and twitches with pain, but Clara Hale has no medicine to offer against that agony, unless you count love. In an old bentwood rocker, she soothes the hurting child. “I love you and God loves you,” she promises. “Your mother loves you too, but she’s sick right now, like you are.” She coaxes the baby to nurse at a bottle. She bathes the child, croons softly, tries a little patty-cake game. “After a while, maybe you get a smile,” she tells a visitor. “So you know the baby’s trying too, you keep loving it...and you wait.”

It was a moving story which told about Clara Hale spending a lifetime caring for other women’s children. In a fifth-floor walkup, she raised 40 foster children as well as three of her own. Most of those foster children were babies who became addicted to heroin while still in their mothers, wombs. As she explained to one of her visitors, “The baby craves something he doesn’t understand and it may take a month before he is cleansed of the addiction.” Mama Hale would understand our scripture lesson from James today. She put it into practice.

I don’t know if you are aware of it or not, but we preacher types walk a pretty thin line between two statements from the Gospel. Should we preach only about “salvation by grace through faith”, or should we sometimes remind our church family it is important that we not only profess our faith with our mouths. It is just as important that we profess our faith with our lives. It is not always a comfortable place for us to be.

We Presbyterians – although we give much credit and credence to the words and wisdom of John Calvin – actually began our journey through the life of Martin Luther. Do you remember him? He is the one who spoke out against the Roman Catholic Church with his 95 Theses.

It was in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome that Luther, the good but exasperated monk, found his home. The home he found was in grace. He had formerly believed that he could only be accepted by God if he did everything right: if he kept his vows as a priest; that he was the right kind of pastor; that he was holy in every way. The trouble was that he could not do all those things, at least not perfectly or as well as he thought he should. The confessions he made didn’t seem to him to be enough to cover up all the mistakes.

Then Luther discovered Paul’s letter to the Romans, and the concept of grace, saved by

grace alone. All his striving, all his working, all his trying to please God, his superiors, his conscience – none of it was the important thing; grace was the card which trumped it all.

Luther was a scholar, and he knew this letter of James. The only problem was that when he read it through the lense of grace, he saw it as a dangerous letter. He was afraid that people would see faith as something which could only be made good by working hard and trying to be perfect. It was a futile faith, in his mind. People would never measure up.

As I put Paul’s letters and James’ letter side by side, I wonder if it really has to be an either/or choice. Can’t it, instead, be a both/and situation. I mean, certainly the writer of James had a slightly different angle from which he came at faith, but aren’t different angles good? James writes from the Wisdom tradition in which a righteous person is one who does righteous things. In that tradition, faith is visible.

But that isn’t all. There is something else. Listen to what the writer of James does not say. He doesn’t say that you must work to have faith. What he says is that “faith without works is dead”. I really don’t know how we can disagree with that. If we come to church every week – if we pray at every whipstitch – if we proclaim our belief in Jesus with our mouths – it doesn’t seem to mean much to us or anyone else unless we do something with it.

As I was thinking about what I might share with you today, I kept remembering a poem I heard in one of my college courses. Now as many of you know I went to college in my late thirties, and the school I attended was a Christian Liberal Arts College. So I guess it isn’t surprising that many of my classes included a lot of Christian literature. The poem which kept coming into my conscience was one I read for a social work class. It is called “Prayer and Potatoes” and it is from that poem that the title of

my sermon today was derived. The poem written by John Tyler Pettee goes like this:

“An old lady sat in her old arm-chair,  
with wrinkled face and disheveled hair,  
and pale and hanger-worn features;  
for days and for weeks her only fare,  
as she sat there in her old arm-chair,  
had been nothing but potatoes.

And now they were gone: of bad or good  
Not one was left for the old lady’s food  
Of these her stock of potatoes.  
And she sighed and said, “What shall I do”  
where shall I send, and to whom shall I go,  
To get some more potatoes?

And she thought of the deacon over the way,  
The deacon so ready to worship and pray,  
Whose cellar was full of potatoes  
And she said, “I will send for the deacon to come  
he’ll not mind much to give me some  
of such a store of potatoes.

And the deacon came over as fast as he could,  
Thinking to do the old lady some good,  
But never thought once of potatoes;  
He asked her directly to tell her *chief* want,  
And she, simple soul, expecting a grant,  
Immediately answered, “Potatoes”.

But the deacon’s religion went not that way;  
He was more accustomed to preach and to pray  
Than to give of his hoarded potatoes;  
So, not hearing, of course, what the old lady  
said, he rose to pray with uncovered head;  
But *she* only thought of potatoes.

He prayed for patience, for wisdom, and grace;  
But when he prayed, “O Lord, give her peace,”  
She audibly sighed, “Give potatoes;”  
And at the end of each prayer that he said,

He heard, or thought that he heard, in its stead,  
the same request for potatoes.

The deacon was troubled - knew not what to do;  
‘Twas embarrassing, very, to have her act so  
About “those carnal potatoes.”  
So ending his prayer, he started for home;  
As the door closed behind him, he heard a deep  
groan, O, give to the hungry potatoes.”  
And that groan followed him all the way home;  
In the midst of the night it haunted his room –  
“O, give to the hungry potatoes”  
He could bear it no longer; arose and dressed,  
From his well-filled cellar taking in haste  
A bag of his best potatoes.

Again he went to the widow’s lone hut;  
Her sleepless eyes she had not yet shut;  
But there she sat in her old arm-chair,  
With the same wan features, the same sad air;  
So entering in, he poured on the floor  
A bushel or more from his goodly store  
Of the very best potatoes.

Your faith is alive when you sit by the  
bedside of a sick or dying loved one. Your faith  
is alive when you send a group off on a mission  
trip to create a play ground for children in  
Belize. Your faith is alive when you listen to  
someone whose heart is broken. Your faith is  
alive when you do things that you faith leads you  
to do. If you never do anything with your belief,  
than your faith dies.

A living faith is one which looks to the  
neighbor and is shared in concrete ways with  
energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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