

The pope is travelling through farm country, bored as his chauffeur drives. Eventually, he asks his chauffeur if he can drive for a bit. After consideration, the chauffeur accepts, and gets some shut-eye on the backseat. The pope, finally allowed to do what he wants with no one watching, puts the pedal to the metal and soon gets pulled over. The officer approaches the car and looks at the pope. He shakes his head, looks again, then tells the pope to kindly wait as he calls his superior. "Chief, there's... uhm... a bit of a tough situation..." "Oh, come on, you're on traffic duty, how hard can it be?" "I just stopped a very, very famous and important person, so I don't know if I can give him a ticket for speeding." "For god's sake, even if it's the President everyone has to obey the law. Who is the person you're talking about, anyway?" "Frankly, I've got no idea, but he's got the pope as his chauffeur."

Rules, rules, rules. The world is full of rules. School is beginning and there are all sorts of rules for teachers and students. Rules at the pool. Rules at home. And as we see with the Pope, rules of the road. And since we are talking about the Bishop of Rome, we might mention there seem to be lots of rules in church. Or are there? Jesus doesn't seem to think so. Rather, Jesus seems to think like his brother James that what is more important than rules is the implanted word.

We are fairly confident that the author of the epistle of James is the same person we read about in Acts who is considered the first bishop of Jerusalem and perhaps the earliest leader of the Church, who is most likely the biological brother of Jesus. Nothing about scripture is 100% when we consider it as a work of history, but this is accepted as fact with at least as much confidence as anything else scriptural. Why is this important? Because we do not accept that every jot and tittle attributed to Jesus was actually spoken by Jesus and some things were most likely inserted over time, so that when we hear from someone like the brother of Jesus credited with being an early bishop of the Church, who seems to have settled a dispute between Peter and Paul, yes, *the* Peter, and *the* Paul, it helps us confidently gain insight into Christ himself. If James says it in the epistle and we hear echoes of James in the gospels, then something is jiving. What is jiving here, in today's readings?

The theme emerging seems to be that religion is not a set of rules but a heartfelt way of life that can be seen both in word and deed in the things which are done and left undone. Which challenges us to wonder: how are we doing with our religion?

Very few Christians agree on many things about Jesus Christ and Christianity. We need to get comfortable with that reality. I mentioned a moment ago that James settled a dispute between Peter and Paul and he did it by telling them to go their separate ways and do what they believed God was calling each to do. So one of the earliest, major schisms in the Church happens in the book of Acts, five minutes after it all began. Which helps us keep it all in perspective and know that we may not agree on everything but we must not condemn those who believe differently nor hold ourselves to impossible standards, nor allow the mysteries of our faith to overwhelm us; they exist to sustain us. Some Christians focus on the salvation that comes through Christ, some focus on the love we find in Christ. How about you? What is your focus? How are you most comfortable practicing Christianity?

For those who focus on the love, today's passages are wonderful because they invite us to engage in a heartfelt faith practice that finds its truest expression in service to others. They are incredibly reminiscent of a later passage in Mark beginning at 10:17: *As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

You see, the man asks about eternal life and Jesus says follow the six commandments which tell us how to treat one another. Similar passages are found elsewhere in Mark and in Luke and Matthew. Notice he doesn't say believe in him, nor even mention the first four commandments about our relationship to God. Then he challenges the man to do even better and really experience limitless life right now by giving up his wealth and following Jesus around with his disciples. This is something Saints Francis and Clare do, establishing a monastic community for centuries to come. It is not unheard of. But this man is incapable. Tying these passages together is important because if you read all of James, which I highly recommend, you see the issue being addressed is showing partiality towards the wealthy at the expense of the poor. James is admonishing the community to remember these teachings of Jesus about how we are to consider our wealth and where true joys are to be found.

The Jesus we see in Mark and the Jesus we hear of in James, the brother of Jesus, seem to click. It's worth taking note. They care about practicing a heartfelt religion here and now because this is what it means to experience eternal or limitless life. To care more about our neighbor than our wealth – to care more about love than rules, Jesus and his brother James seem to be saying this is true religion which is truly to experience life to its fullest.

As we begin another academic year at UConn and for students at all levels everywhere, as well as those who teach and those who support and guide, it is a good time to ponder these passages and allow them to help us keep focused on what is truly good. To remember it's not just about getting stuff done and following the rules. It's about living all of life in a meaningful and heartfelt way. Why do we learn? Why do we teach? Why do we care about our growth and development, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually? What will we do with this knowledge and how shall we pass it on? As a Christian I would answer: When we focus on what God has created, we focus on God. When we care about the people God has created, we care for Christ. When we find the love of God in our love for one another, we find eternal - limitless life.