

Kris Gorton, Labor Day 2018

In the Mirror

by Pastor Kris Gorton

September, 2018

I stand before you on this Labor Day weekend with an offering from our coalition partners at Worker Justice Wisconsin. Worker Justice's mission is to:

“Join workers in resolving workplace problems ...

Develop worker leadership... (and)

Engage and mobilize... individuals, labor unions, faith communities
(and

others)... committed to economic, racial, immigrant, and worker
justice”[1].

I am on the Board of Worker Justice Wisconsin. I am also a founding member of the United Church of Christ's national Economic Justice Movement, which was formed “with the goal of continuing and strengthening our work for economic justice.”[2] This weekend, faith communities all across the country are participating in “Labor in the Pulpit.”

And here we are, with God's Word reflected in our midst. What are we to do with that? There is debate. There is uncertainty. Through the millennia, the Letter of James has stirred heated discussions, as the text raises the issue of whether we receive God's fullness of grace and forgiveness through our works, or – as Paul and later Martin

Luther would suggest – through faith alone. In Romans, 3X28, Paul states, “...we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works...” In contrast, James places before us an image of God that does not fade after the Word is planted, but that grows in our response to what we have heard. So today let us, as James writes, “Listen quickly.”

And let us, as James suggests, reflect on being not “merely hearers,” but on being “doers of the word.” Let us consider standing before this reflection of God in our lives and not turn away, not forgetting what we see, but in actively engaging with what we hear. Engaging with God.

Thus I am going to share some stories with you. Stories of seeing ourselves, of seeing each other, of seeing God, beyond that which is reflected... and shiny... before us.

“...if any are hearers... and not doers... they are like those who look... in a mirror...” (James 1X23).

Mirrors. Each day we use mirrors to see ourselves. We stand before these reflective surfaces, and see what others see as they look at us. We stand there, seeking concrete truth, but what we see is only a glimpse. We see only in part, as the outer surface of ourselves reflected back. Yes, this is a portion of who we are, but it is, of course, not our full self. We only see light rays bouncing off a smooth surface.

But there is more there. There is more here. There is more God reflected around us as we play with our kids, have coffee with friends, go to work, see the doctor, dig in our gardens, listen to the news. If we look more closely at the reflections, if we listen more closely to the Word, can we more fully see what is mirrored in our midst today?

In her book, #OccupyTheBible, the Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite writes that:

“The Gospels need to read through movement eyes, through the lives of people who are struggling economically and whose lives, property, and businesses are being dominated by an unjust system...In the movement building that was Jesus’ ministry, labor justice is part of the program; thus Jesus did organize labor (specifically, the fishermen of Galilee). But organizing among those who worked and who were suffering under the economic practices of the time was not an end in itself. Jesus’ broader program included healing, eating and drinking with friends and with those who have been excluded, and enacting a new understanding of community based on mutuality and peace, not violence and greed.”[3]

What is being reflected around us? How are we to hear slowly? What if James’ message for us today were to come to us through the “mirror” of a face-to-face conversation?

I recently talked with a woman in a nearby town. She was around my age, worked full-time and had a second, part-time job. She had teenage children at home and maintained one of those “busy soccer-mom” schedules. During our discussion, her main concern wasn’t about herself, but about her daughter. She told me that her daughter was in her early 20’s, married, and had a one-year old child. This woman was worried about the financial challenges that her daughter and son-in-law faced.

They both worked full time, but had challenges making ends meet. So for housing, they rented a place with friends. Childcare was provided by someone in the neighborhood. Yet they were still struggling financially. Rent. Daycare. Limited-to-no sick days to care for a sick child. Food costs. Car repairs.

Church, these are our Millennials. Those young adults whom the Pew Research Center defines as now between the ages of 22 and 37:

“...most Millennials came of age and entered the workforce facing the height of an economic recession. As is well documented, many of Millennials’ life choices, future earnings and entrance to adulthood have been shaped by (the) recession”[4]

The number of Millennials is “...expected to overtake (the Baby Boomers) in population in 2019.”[5]

Millennials are the most diverse, and most educated, generation in the United States to date. And

many of them are struggling in this economy.

Listen quickly. More Millennials are living at home with parents for financial reasons. Some young families are opting for co-housing with friends. It is not that they don’t want to work, or that they are lazy. Quite the opposite.

We, the older generations (I am a baby boomer) have created an economic situation in which our young adults are facing mounting student loan debt. Many are still finding it difficult to get jobs. And those that are working often earn less than previous generations in similar jobs.[6] Underemployment. There is a lack of affordable, high quality day-care.

The woman with whom I talked wondered about these economic realities, and worried about the

impact not only on her Millennial daughter—but for the next generation as well—her granddaughter.

What if...for us today...the Message is asking us to push back on that status quo—telling us that there IS another way. A Jesus way. And that we need to hurry up... listen quickly. For we live in a county where

the race-based disparities are continuously reflected in statistics regarding our siblings who are African-American in multiple areas such as education, family income, health, and incarceration.

James calls on us to hear God, but to hear God quickly – to be alert – to be receptive. To let God’s words reverberate in our hearts. To see Jesus in the image of another.

Instead of our lives being fleeting mirror images of ourselves, may our lives be full of hearing and acts of doing. Not just fleeting images on the television screen of life before us; but in our turning to more fully see. Our turning to more fully interact. Our turning to more fully realize God’s Word

and presence.

May we do more than look in the mirror...

Amen.

~Pastor Kris

Reflection offered on James 1X17-27, September 2, 2018

[1] “Mission & History.” Worker Justice Wisconsin. May 04, 2018. Accessed

August 30, 2018. <https://workerjustice.org/about-us/mission-history/>.

[2] August 30, 2018 at 1X00 PM, and August 30, 2018 at 8X00 AM.

“Economic Justice Movement.” United Church of Christ. Accessed August

30, 2018. <http://www.ucc.org/ejl>.

[3] Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks. #OccupytheBible: What Jesus Really Said

(and Did) about Money and Power. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013. 39-40.

[4] Dimock, Michael. "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and

Post-Millennials Begin." Pew Research Center. March 01, 2018. Accessed

August 30, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/facttank/>

2018/03/01/defining-generations-where-millennials-end-and-postmillennials-

begin/.

[5] Fry, Richard. "Millennials Projected to Overtake Baby Boomers as

America's Largest Generation." Pew Research Center. March 01, 2018.

Accessed August 30, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/facttank/>

2018/03/01/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/.

[6] Rattner, Steven. "Opinion | We're Making Life Too Hard for Millennials."

The New York Times. January 19, 2018. Accessed August 30, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/opinion/sunday/were-making-lifetoo->

hard-for-millennials.html?_r=0.