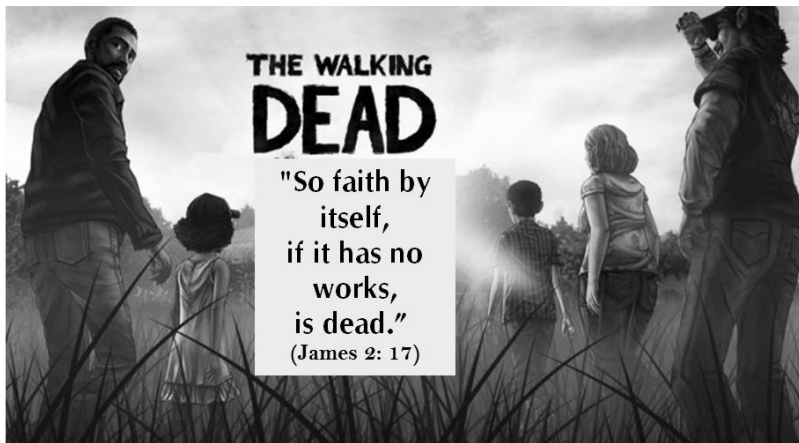


THE WALKING DEAD



Scripture:

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

¹A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. ²The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. ⁹Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; ²³for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

James 2:1-10, 14-17

¹My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



THE WALKING DEAD

Something about this passage made me think about zombies. Did the same thought come to some of you? Probably not; my mind works in mysterious ways.

James, the author of this book, who was the brother of Jesus, might agree with at least one part of my weird theological thinking, because, basically, his book is about the horror of walking through life without faith. Walking through life without soul conscientiousness, like a zombie.

James describes what that state of being is like. He says that you may say you have faith in Jesus and identify yourself as a disciple of Christ, but if you show preference for a rich person over a poor person, and ignore the dirty or poorly dressed people, your faith is fake.

According to James, faith is more than just belief. It is intelligent understanding of who Christ was and is. And for James, faith includes commitment to showing your belief with action.

GENEROSITY

James is also very critical of the self-centered wealthy people. He explains that it is more common for the rich to be the greedy oppressive ones in the world, which actually has been scientifically proven! The most recent research on who is most generous and helpful to those in need concludes that the poor are the more generous, proportionately, than the wealthy. (Like the widow's mite.) The rich tend to give less to help the needy. Surprising? It starts as children.

Even at the young age of four years old, poor kids are more generous than their richer counterparts, according to researchers from the University of California. They carried out an altruism experiment on seventy-four four year olds.

During the experiment, the children played games that would earn them tokens. At the end of the session, the children were told that they could donate some or all of their tokens to ill children who had been unable to take part in the experiment.

The donation time was made to look like it was all in secret, meaning the children were being genuinely altruistic by giving away tokens to benefit others without the motivation of showing off their generosity.

Children from less wealthy parents donated the most, suggesting they were more altruistic than their wealthier peers.

The scientists who designed the study said, "Our findings suggest that fostering altruistic tendencies might be one path to promoting better health and well-being for all children." They concluded that teaching pre-school children to help those in need can lead to them being healthier later in life. And rich parents eager to hold on to their money could be unintentionally passing down a decreased "social sensitivity" to their children.

Another sociological study on generosity found that the poor were more generous because they knew what it was like to be in need. Their time of suffering inspired empathy towards others going through it, too.

James was aware of this even back in the year seventy. He said the poor will be heirs of God's kingdom. And Proverbs 11 says: "A generous person will prosper. Whoever refreshes others will be refreshed."

Yet I think it is hard for us to truly believe this because we think we have worked hard to get what we have and we do not fully understand all the obstacles in our wealthy society that make it hard for a poor person to climb the ladder of success and security. God created us to work as a network and a supportive community for the poor in our midst and afar. The earth has been created that way by God.

GOD'S CONCERN FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Bible contains more than 300 verses on the poor, social justice, and God's deep concern for both.

None of this pull yourself up by your own bootstraps is in the Bible. Proverbs 31 says: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

In seminary at Princeton they emphasized that Jesus has a "preference for the poor." Father

Oscar Romero, the Jesuit priest theologian, said, “The phrase “preference for the poor” does not deny God’s universal love which “shows no partiality.” Yet, in the midst of deadly structural injustice and the institutionalized violence of poverty we are called to intervene on behalf of the poor.”

Jesus called attention to the suffering of the poor when he announced to the Jewish leaders that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read: ‘The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favor’ (Luke 4:18-19).

Because Jesus also loved the wealthy he sought their conversion to his philosophy of preferring the poor. Jesus understood that people can be distracted by riches, power, pride, self-satisfaction and security. We can feel as if we don’t need God because we have money, shelter, food, and nice clothes. Material things distract us from the ways of God that enable us to share what we have with those in need. When we are worried about protecting all of our stuff, we typically don’t make friends with those who are downtrodden and in need. We worry they might steal our stuff or hurt us. Materialism leads to selfishness.

ZOMBIES??

By now you are probably asking yourself: “So what does this have to do with zombies?” The last verse in this passage from James made me think of zombies. It says: “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

So if we are not involved in demonstrating our faith somehow through helping those who are poor and suffering from economic oppression, then our faith is dead and basically we are dead.

Have you see these kinds of zombies walking around? They are the ones that pretend they are happy. They spend a lot of time shopping, gossiping, and making themselves look and feel perfect because their spiritual lives are deeply empty and meaningless. They are walking

around spiritually dead and emotionally stressed. They are the walking spiritually dead.

The spiritually dead get their momentary thrills from things like gambling, drinking, purchasing expensive items, going on Ashley Madison websites and having affairs. These rich and sometimes famous are so pressured to keep up their image and status, they go in great debt and often hit bottom on drugs to help them get through the day. It is then, at the bottom, that God is able to convert their souls into living souls again, because they are humble at the bottom and more open to God’s love and guidance. When the glitter fades, reality is often harsh and lonely.

ESCAPING REALITY

To cope, many people escape reality by watching television. Six million people tuned in to a final episode to see what happened to survivors of a zombie apocalypse on the successful TV series *The Walking Dead*. Are there any of those six million here today?

The Walking Dead is an American horror TV show based on a comic book. The lead character is sheriff’s deputy Rick Grimes who awakens from a months-long coma to confront an apocalyptic world overrun by zombies. Grimes reunites with his family and becomes the leader of a group he forms with other survivors. Together they struggle to survive in and adapt to a world filled with zombies and some humans who are even more dangerous than the zombies themselves.

David Murphy, the author of *Zombies for Zombies: Advice and Etiquette for the Living Dead*, says America’s zombie fascination has a religious root. Zombies are humans who have “lost track of their souls,”

“Our higher spirit prevents us from doing stupid and violent things like, say.... eating a neighbor,” Murphy says. “When we are devoid of such spiritual ‘guidance,’ we become like walking bags of hungry flesh.”

ZOMBIE THEOLOGY

A post by John Morehead in the Religion Dispatches online magazine titled "*Toward a Zombie Theology*", believes there is a religious significance to people's fascination with zombies. After all, zombie stories grapple with common religious themes: the end of the world, resurrection and the nature of the human soul.

Stephen Joel Garver, a philosophy professor at La Salle University in Pennsylvania, says zombies also resonate with so many Americans today because of the Great Recession.

"We live in a time where we talk about 'zombie banks' and 'zombie corporations' - the economic equivalent of the walking dead ...," he says. "This points to a bigger anxiety about an 'apocalypse' in which the familiar secure structures of our lives fall apart - in the face of economic collapse." Garver says zombies represent "human desire at its more unconstrained: ravenous and relentless."

Garver says that some of the implicit questions in zombie movies are: "How do we decide what's right or wrong? Does acting morally even matter?" "What is our bulwark against the darkness?"

Most zombie movies end with no hope. There are no happy endings. The government, the military, the scientists all become zombie stew. That is why I will never watch one of these shows. I never have and never will.

Yet, without having to watch the gory violence in zombie movies, there is something to gain from just pondering zombie theology because it asks tough questions about redemption. Many religious traditions teach that no one is beyond redemption. Zombies represent our basic fears of death, decay and desecration.

OUR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The final lesson in zombie theology is harsh. Thank goodness we have a Christian theology of forgiveness and redemption and unconditional love! Yet, there are many out there walking in this world as if they are dead. They live only for the thrill of the moment. They have no hope for the future. Their souls feel lost.

Desmond Tutu said there is a universal spiritual hunger that is ultimately integral to what it means to be human. To be human our souls need faith. Saint Augustine summed it up

by saying, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God." We all hunger for God and only God can fulfill that hunger. We become truly human by feeding our souls with the things of the Spirit of God.

In Rowan Williams book *Where God Happens*, he teaches that the actions of faith (like those James talks about in today's passage) must include connecting others with life-giving reality. He says: What if the real criteria for a properly functioning life and for social existence in its fullness, has to do with the business of connecting each other with life-giving reality that includes reconciliation and wholeness. Our own success in life would be measured by the degree to which those around us were discovering a way to truth and abundant life? Let's ponder that thought as we partake of our Holy Communion today.

Benediction:

Don't worry, you are not a zombie; you are a blessing to this world, especially when you act out your faith for the reconciliation, healing and wholeness of others.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen



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