



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Ethics in the Letter of James**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

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In the epistle reading from the Letter of James we heard, "Be doers of the word..." I think that this would actually be a good mission statement for a church. Our mission is to be doers, living examples of Christ in the world. It's short, sweet and easy to remember.

We really don't know who wrote these impassioned words. Traditional wisdom says that James was the brother of Jesus but most scholars have taken a different view, claiming that it is another James, or someone writing in the name of Jesus' brother to give the words authority. There is no way for us to know. There are no clues in the letter as to where or when the author might have written this epistle either. What we do know is that James was in contact with a particular congregation or congregations that he felt suffered from pride, ill treatment of the poor, and the delusion that as long as they gave lip service to the proper creed nothing else was demanded of them. (A Beginners Guide to The Books of the Bible, p.116) So we might say that this letter is a very early presentation of Christian ethics.

What do we mean by ethics? As always, I start with a dictionary definition, and Webster says that ethics is, "the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment." I am blessed to be married to the author of a very fine book called *Ethics: Finding True North*. Peter developed his thoughts on ethics as a lawyer, organizational consultant, and student of human consciousness. He writes that ethics has two dimensions. First, it is a practice that involves moral decision making, and second, it is a practice that requires critical thinking. That is, the ability and willingness to engage in disciplined analysis of specific situations, to grasp the consequences of one's decisions and weigh the effects of those consequences on those who will be directly impacted. It's complicated.

We hear charges of unethical behavior all around us. Congress has committees in both houses to look into allegations of unethical behavior. The medical, legal, accounting, architectural and other fields have their own mechanisms to investigate and address such situations. Each of those disciplines has its own described ethical standards, which its professionals are expected to follow in their decision-making processes. But as Peter points out, the tricky thing is that as cultures evolve so do ethics. For example, there was a time not so long ago when patients would be kept in the dark about their own diagnoses. The University of California at San Francisco website says this: "Being honest with patients about their diagnoses

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is a relatively new addition to the ethics of health care. Until recently, doctors often avoided telling patients the full extent of serious diagnoses, particularly when there were limited treatment options. In addition, in some cultures, it is customary to hide a serious diagnosis from the patient for fear that he or she will lose hope or become demoralized by the information." Things have changed.

In our everyday lives, the matter of ethics is equally challenging. Many of us do not have prescribed codes of conduct and direction in our work lives. There are people who feel that it is appropriate to decide morality strictly on personal belief. While teaching a class on ethics to law students, Peter had a student tell him, "Ethics is about morality and morality is about values. If you think something is right, that is the ethical thing to do." Possibly well-meaning, but I trust that you can see the shortcomings of such an approach—ethics for a community cannot be determined by the values of any one individual or what one particular person thinks is "right".

This brings us to the field of christian ethics. Since the time of Aristotle, the study of ethics has looked at all we do as aiming toward some good end. So we could say that ethics is the study of human good and how we pursue it. (*Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*; Robin W. Lovin). Religious thought weighs in how we define the good life. The Bible talks about God's blessing and how that is experienced as health, family, honest work, enjoying the fruits of one's labors, dignity, community, security, etc. We also understand that we do not traverse this life alone; we are surrounded by others who expect or at least hope for the same blessings. There are constant choices presented that require us to consider our own pursuit of some facet of the good life against the needs and desires of others. Balancing our own interests against the interests of those around us is a good way to think of Christian ethics.

Like professional codes of conduct, religious practices can give us the standards against which we make our choices. The life and teachings of Jesus are the standards we Christians commonly use. Christian ethics is a perpetual WWJD exercise. As Robin Lovins says in his book *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*, "Living a good life requires us to do some things to make our own lives good, but it also involves us in relationships that may require us to choose against what is most obviously good for ourselves....however, Jesus often takes generally accepted obligations and pushes them a step further, so that our concern for others requires more of us than we originally thought." (12)

The author of the letter of James was aware that the ethics of the congregation to which he was writing were in need of some reworking. He said, you cannot just hear the teachings, say that you believe, and then ignore them in the choices that you make. "Be doers of the word, not merely hearers who deceive themselves." He talks about letting go of anger and understanding and practicing generosity as important facets of a Godly life. "Take care of the widows and orphans in their distress..."

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One of the difficult dilemmas of ethics is that even with a rigorous process to follow and full awareness of the effects of any choice, there is often not one clear right answer. This is most often true in the biggest issues. Terry Schaivo's tragic condition and the battle over her life and death thrust us all into an ethical swamp with no clear path to follow. Both sides of the situation had valid reasoning. Whatever happened, there would be consequences that a number of people would find objectionable, given their personal values. That is the way it often is with issues like assisted suicide, the death penalty, abortion, the needs and rights of immigrants, the legalization of marijuana, the national budget. In all these cases, a secular ethical decision-making process requires more than reliance on a set of personal values. There are larger, legal, social and cultural standards to consider. Is the standard different for those of us who are Christians?

I believe that it is. If we are to be doers of the word, not merely hearers, then we must apply the standards of Jesus' own life and teachings to the tough issues and the not-so-tough ones. First and foremost, doers of the word respect the dignity of every human being—indeed every created thing—and take into account how the choices we make affect them. Jesus' example of self-sacrificing love holds us to a higher standard than the prevailing cultural individualism. What is possible and legal is not always ethical by Jesus' standards.

James urged his congregation to accept the challenge of their faith. That challenge still holds for us today, in a much more complex world. That's why we are here together, as the Body of Christ, working together for the kingdom come, with love and God's help.

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