

“Bold Love in Action”

James 1:17-27, Matthew 22:36-39, Mark 7:1-9

September 9, 2012

Pastor James York

Last week I watched the movie, “The Hunger Games”. It is set in the future in a time where the world is divided into two classes, the rich and poor. The rich live in luxury enjoying an abundance of food, sparkling cities, electronic gadgets, vibrant clothing, and all kinds of body modifications. The poor are segregated, forced to live in barricaded, patrolled districts, where they struggle for every morsel, are dressed in tatters, live in falling down shacks, and are left to do the hard undesirable work of the rich. They must fight for every poor paying, dirty job, while the rich get richer. 74 years earlier the poor revolted, demanding better jobs and an equal playing field. It escalated into war. The rich with their many resources and weapons won and they started a new tradition to keep the poor in line and desensitize the rich. This was called the hunger games. Every year each district is forced to send two youth who are put in a small forest. The 24 youth must compete for water, food, and shelter. Every move is televised. The rich fill the forest with weapons and encourage the youth to kill each other. When only one youth remains alive, they win, and receive food and luxury items for themselves and their district.

For 74 years this was an annual tradition. It showed the poor that they were less than human, objects, pawns to be used, controlled and enjoyed by the rich. It showed the rich that they were powerful, and better than the poor. Over the years, as they cheered for the victor, they become unaware of the violence, the pain and distress of the poor.

At first, the Hunger Games made me sad, that such division and hatred between people was even be possible. Then I was appalled by the way the poor were treated. Since then, the Hunger Games has stuck with me, resonating with scripture, unsettling me, and convicting me.

The letter of James states **James 1:22 & 27 “Be doers of the world and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” “Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”**

I found the Hunger Games so unsettling because when I really look at the world and myself, there are ways in which we are becoming like the setting in the hunger games. I really, really enjoy football, both college and professional. Is it right that we

have built a new baseball and football stadium and will build another football stadium for millions of dollars when we have so many poor, homeless, undereducated and pressing needs in our state? Many of the players and owners are rich. Why don't they build their own stadiums? When we say yes to one group we must say no to another. I wonder, if the poor would have been invited and paraded around the capital like the football commissioner, would the vote have been different? Yet I will confess that I watch football and have paid money to go to games. Should I have given that money to the poor? The York family does give generously to this church, charities and Remember Niger. Is that enough? Or in James words, am I deceiving myself, justifying my behavior?

In the Hunger Games, it seems absurd that one day there will be districts where the poor are abused, barricaded and controlled. This type of tragedy happened in the holocaust, and genocide is happening today. What about our immigration? We have a border where some want a better wall and patrols to keep people out. I will admit I want to protect our standard of living, keep our rich resources to ourselves, yet should where someone is born determine their quality of life?

Many years ago a speaker at a conference said some words that ever since have challenged me. He said, "You cannot claim you are not prejudice against someone or a group until you become friends with them or someone from the group." I do not have any homeless or immigrant friends so I cannot know what it is like to; I would say "be in there shoes" but in reality what it is like to live barefoot like them.

The letter of James says. **James 1:17-27** "Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. God never changes or casts a shifting shadow. God chose to give birth to us by giving us God's true word. And we, out of all creation, became God's prized possession. Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you."

There is more than care for the poor in the Hunger Games that is unsettling to me. Jesus said, **Mark 7:8-9** "Their worship is a farce, for they teach human-made ideas as

commands from God. For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition." Then Jesus said, **"You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition."** The Hunger Games, watching youth battle to the death, became an annual tradition. How far away from this are we? Do some cheer for a crash in racing? We pay people to take and administer vicious, hurtful hits in sports. Some teams feel so much pressure to win that they take harmful performance enhancing drugs, and coaches pay players to go out and intentionally hurt another player. Does the excitement of the game, the pageantry, the tradition, the money, propel us to sometimes turn away and ignore violations and crimes against innocent victims? The highest rated news and most watched shows and movies often have lots of violence. Are we becoming desensitized to violence? Are we becoming fatigued in our compassion? How do we exclude others, limit another's freedom, and deny rights and basic necessities by human ideas, politics, traditions, amendments and laws thereby ignoring God's law? Do we sometimes hide behind our rules, procedures and giving? Deceiving ourselves that we are in the right, we are doing enough, when God is calling us to do more?

Jesus made the intent of the law clear. Jesus was asked. **Matthew 22:36-39** **"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"** Jesus replied, **"'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."**

The gospel of Mark proclaims. **Mark 7:1-9** **"One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. They noticed that some of his disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. Similarly, they don't eat anything from the market until they immerse their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, 'Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.'" Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach human-made ideas as commands from God. For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition.'" Then Jesus said, "You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition."**

This passage calls into question our tendency to make absolute law of certain human interpretations of God's will—particularly those that serve our personal interests or make us feel comfortable. We are often distracted by rules and policies from loving people. It is of utmost importance to have our motives, intentions and attitude inspired by

love. We are to value love and compassion over law and tradition. We are to follow the spirit of the law over the letter of the law.

In Frederick Buechner's book *Antonio* speaks of meeting the woman he love saying. "I wanted to open my heart to Ellie not so much so she could see what was inside, but so I could." Pastor Bret Younger reflects. "It is in opening our hearts to God that we learn what is inside. We have to choose to see the evil that lurks within us. If we are honest with God, we have to admit: we spend most days in forgetfulness of God; we waste good gifts we have been given; we fail to be true even to our own standards; we are blind to the suffering of others; we have a lack of concern for the wrongs that don't touch us and an oversensitivity to the wrongs that do."

Pastor Martha Spong asks. "Are we compelled by love? Or are we controlled by laws?" The law is meant to foster community not to divide people, not to maintain your position, or status, in the community.

The Hunger Games, and these scriptures, are challenging us and calling us to bold love. I find them convicting. They made my popcorn and soda, which I do not need for calories, taste bad, as I thought of those who are hungry. They made watching the movie with a DVD player, on a High Definition TV in an air conditioned house seem extravagant knowing that many at that moment were walking miles to get a drink of unsanitary water. They made my rest awkward as I could have been doing something to help someone or making a friend with someone in need. I find this sermon challenging, the questions it raises are difficult so I would rather not share it with you, however, God is calling us to love extravagantly and have compassion for the poor. I wish I knew exactly how God is calling you to be more loving so I can name it for you. I wish I knew what tradition, what human reasoning you are hiding behind so I can name it for you. I wish I knew the right balance of urging you to action and forgiving grace you need to hear this morning, however I am not sure even how to answer this for myself.

Jesus urges us to love with all our heart, mind and soul. Rituals, traditions, laws are all good tools if they move you and others to deeper love. Donald McKim wrote. "We can look at creeds as either functioning like a bird cage or a bird bath. The "bird cage" seeks to encase Christian belief within certain expressions with no chance for expansion or development. The "bird bath" provides the source of life with the water in the bath as birds come and go in freedom. The bird bath model opens possibilities for growth and development in our thought as we are nourished and refreshed by the "waters" of Scripture as well as the creedal expressions that have preceded us in the faith. It does not mean we will fly off into nothingness or nonbelief. It means we will continually come back to the living waters that provide what we need to follow the trajectories toward which the Bible points; and follow the directions our creedal traditions aim us toward."

Jesus urges us to love with all our heart, mind and soul. Mother Teresa said, "Every time you sacrifice something at great cost—every time you renounce something

that appeals to you for the sake of the poor—you are feeling a hungry Christ.” Can you image a future where people matter more than the rules?

Jesus urges us to love with all our heart, mind and soul. Our thoughts and way of life can capture us hindering our love, keeping us from enjoying fellowship with all people, or they can set us free to greater and greater love. Jesus urges us to rid ourselves of vices that separate us, barricade us and encage us from one another.

Watch your thoughts for they become words. Watch your words for they become actions. Watch your actions for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become your character. And watch your character, for it becomes your destiny! What we think, we become.

Steve Edington says, “Once upon a time there was a bear who traveled with a circus. His only role was to sit, or pace around, in a nine by nine foot cage that would be placed beside the road near the entrance to the circus. He was a living billboard. All the bear ever did, day in and day out, was walk around in a square -- nine feet in each direction. The circus went bankrupt. The bear was sent off to a zoo. By a great stroke of fortune it was one of these zoos that allows the animals to have a lot of freedom of movement in areas that resemble their natural habitat so the bear was -- free to wander as he would within the overall confines of his surroundings. And yet for the remainder of his life the bear never ventured beyond an area of a nine-by-nine-foot square. He was afraid to break out of his old pattern. ...The only bars left were the ones in his mind and spirit, which proved to be as real as the ones that had been around him. It was those bars of the mind and spirit that he had to get rid of in order to truly know a resurrection.”

May all of us more and more break out of our cages, the ways we limit love, to experience more and more resurrection as we grow bolder and bolder in our love. Amen.