

Sunday, June 13, 2004

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



Sects in the City

James 4:1-17

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, in the stillness of this moment may these words be your living word to us. We know they will be for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

On a recent episode of *Sex in the City*, Charlotte, who could only be described as an elegant Episcopalian, has converted to Judaism in order not to lose her boyfriend, Harry. Harry is Jewish and he will not convert to Christianity so Charlotte converts to Judaism. She's gone through all the rites and the rituals and she's memorized everything. One Friday night she prepares the Sabbath meal and has everything ready for Harry. Harry comes in the door and comments on the beauty of the table and the way the ritual is set up and then he turns on the New York Mets baseball game.

Charlotte gets angry and tries to get him to turn the game off. Finally she thinks he has. She begins the Sabbath ritual. The food is being served and then she looks over and sees that Harry is still watching the Mets game on mute! Charlotte is furious. She yells at Harry, "I gave up Christ for you and you can't give up the Mets!" Now this little vignette from *Sex in the City*, I believe, has a lot to say and is at the heart of our sermon title today, "Sects in the City", but spelled s-e-c-t-s. Don't you love this title?

How do we deal with sects? Should Christians always give up what we believe to get along? Do Christians always have to be silent about what we believe to exist in a polytheistic society? Do Christians have to water down what we believe to get along with people who do not believe what we do? The word sect literally means any religious body. Any body of organized religious beliefs is by one definition, a sect. A more accurate and perhaps a more literal definition, is that a sect is an extreme part of a religious body or a schismatic, divisive part of a religious body. Some might even call a sect a "heretical" part of that religious body.

A question that this sermon raises is what does it

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mean for us as Christians, in truly one of the most diverse cities in the world, to be faithful to our calling as Christians? How do we deal with other religions? How do we deal with people who believe different things than we do about eternal life, about forgiveness, about grace, about heaven? How do we respond to Christians within the mainstream of Christianity who actually hold to a different form of Christianity than we do? How do we deal with all of them?

I believe the message in James 4 has a lot to say about diversity. We are diverse socio- economically. We are diverse racially and ethnically. Today is the Puerto Rico Day parade. We have many parades and they are all part of the rich tapestry of the fabric of New York City. We are diverse in age, in gender, and in sexual orientation. We are diverse politically. We are diverse religiously. Many people today are asking how do Christians deal with Islam? Members of the Muslim faith are asking how do we deal with Jews and with Christians? Protestants are talking about dealing with Roman Catholics. This is not unlike the environment in which James, the bishop in the early church, wrote this letter. It's really distilled wisdom. James was charging the early Christians to take their faith very seriously, but to be on guard, particularly as the world gets more polytheistic and more pluralistic, so they would not water down everything they believe in "just to get along."

As you know, most of the early Christians were Jews first. As the Gospel spread and Gentiles, i.e. anyone who was not a Jew, became a believer in Jesus Christ, the question was raised, does a Gentile have to become a Jew first and adhere to Jewish food laws and all the Jewish practices in order to become a Christian? James moderated a council of the early church and they debat-

ed this issue. They concluded that you did not have to become a Jew first. But this was a very controversial issue in a pluralistic society.

There were also questions regarding pagan religious traditions such as offering sacrifices to the gods of nature. For example, as a Christian and a believer in Jesus Christ would you accept an invitation to a party in honor of lord Serapis who some said was a god that produced rainfall and bountiful crops? Would you go to a party where a sacrifice to such a god was going to be made? Should you do that or not? What if you were a Christian stonemason in the early church and you got a contract from your employer to build a heathen, pagan temple to honor a fertility cult. Should you take that contract and make the stone for that temple? What if you were a Christian tailor, should you make an outfit or a uniform for someone who is working for a religious cult? Should you do that if you're a Christian tailor? As bishop of the early church, James was dealing with all these questions.

How do we as Christians relate in a polytheistic society? James wrote this letter and one of the things he says in it is that Christians have got to be faithful to God in the midst of pluralism. I think he gives three pieces of distilled wisdom that are as applicable today in 2004 as they were 2000 years ago. James says to us you've got to wake up, you've got to show up, and you've got to speak up.

WAKE UP

James is issuing a wake up call to the early church. I wonder, how do you feel when you're awakened in the morning by the alarm clock? Are you glad to get up? Many people say it's not easy to get up. Suzanne and I have three grandchildren. Sometimes they stay with us and sometimes we stay with them. When we go to bed on the nights we are with them, we don't worry about alarm clocks. One morning not long ago our little grandson Nathan came in. He wanted to play the jungle game early in the morning. He said, "Granddad, do you want to play the jungle game?" I said, "Nathan, what time is it?" Now Nathan is just learning his numbers so he went over to the digital clock and he said, "5 2 2." I tried to assure Nathan that even God sleeps until 6 3 0!

What James was saying to the early church was you better wake up. He didn't mince any words. It's a tough word. He said, frankly, you're adulterers. But he meant something more basic than sexual immorality. He meant you're committing adultery with other gods. You've become promiscuous. You're worshipping other gods. The people valued power and prestige more than prayer. They valued success and security more than spirituality. They valued finances more than faith. James is saying, you can't go down two roads at the same time. You've got to make a choice. You can't worship the gods

of the culture and the God revealed in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus Christ. You've got to make a choice. Which road are you going to go down? James said, "If you go down the road of the culture then you're an enemy of God." Many in that society wanted to go down the road of the culture. They wanted God to be an addendum in their life and James is saying, "If you do that, you're going to miss life." For only God - the God revealed in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus Christ - can be the integrating center of your life. James loved the people enough to give them that wake-up call.

James challenged the people to take a step of faith because there was something missing in their lives. Fred had something missing in his life. Fred came to me after an early morning study I led some time ago for UP@7, our young adults who meet at 7:00 am on Wednesday mornings. He thanked me and told me how much he appreciated it. I said to him as he turned away, "Hey Fred, you're the man." And he said, "Oh no, no, you're the man." I said, "No, you're the man." He said, "What do you mean by that?" And I said, "Well you know, I like you, you're a good guy, you're the man." Then he came back to me and he said, "Can I be honest with you." I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm a hollow man. On the outside I seem like I'm the man but I'm telling you on the inside I'm a hollow man. I haven't got anything inside."

So Fred and I have been talking and praying about how you fill that void inside. Fred had build so much of his life on what his employer says, what the women he dates say, what his parent said, what his coaches said. He had never listened to what God was saying to him. To put God number one in your life is not some theoretical, theological thing. It's to listen more to God than to the culture. It's really not to worry about what other people say as much as what God is saying to you. I pray for the day when Fred will no longer be a hollow man. I pray for the day when God will fill up that empty place within him.

Is there anyone here today who feels like a hollow man or a hollow woman? Is there anyone who is hollow inside? Is there anyone who wakes up in the middle of the night and can't sleep because you're anxious, worried and afraid and something is eating at you? Well, whatever that is, it's a hollow place. Oh, you may try to fix yourself something to drink or something to eat but that's not going to fill the void inside. St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God." Only God can fill that hollow space. Is there anybody here who is a hollow person? What James is saying to us is, "Wake up and recognize that only God, the God revealed in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus can fill that hollow place within."

SHOW UP

Secondly James says not only do you have to wake up but I want you to show up. There's a part of the text in James 4 that is really troublesome. I have spent quite a bit of time trying to understand it. James says, "May your joy turn to sorrow. May your gladness turn to despair." I've read that several times and I've thought what in the world does he mean by that? He says lament, mourn and weep. What James is saying echoes Jesus' words in the Beatitudes, Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. What James is saying is that witnessing to your faith is not only waking up and putting God number one in your life but it is also showing up. When you have your heart broken by the things that break the heart of God, when you are so distraught with the lack of reconciliation in the world, with the homelessness, with people who are ill in despair then you start to show up in difficult places. Who showed up in your life when you were broken? Who showed up when you were in the hospital? Who showed up when you had a decision to make? Who showed up when you thought you'd done something so bad you could never be forgiven for it? Who showed up and stuck with you when other people were deserting you? Who showed up in your life? People who show up, James says, are a witness to their faith. James is saying, if you really want to be a Christian in a polytheistic society, you have to wake up and put God number one and you have to show up - in places of despair and alienation, in places where reconciliation and peacemaking are needed. That's where God wants us to show up. Where does God want you to show up this coming week?

Margaret Shafer has shown up in New York City in some pretty tough places. I wish you all knew her as I do and as our staff and the many who have worked with her do. For 14 years Margaret has been our associate in outreach. We honor her for her work in education and outreach because she has shown up. Let me illustrate.

When Margaret reads in the paper that something is happening in the city that's going to affect our church she shows up at our local police precinct. She doesn't just call or email. She walks over and talks to them about the event and how it will impact Fifth Avenue Church. Then she shows up with our homeless friends on our steps and with our staff in the building to explain what the city is planning and how it will affect us. A few years ago when the police were having difficulty with the homeless people, the police came to Margaret and asked her to teach their officers how to talk with and listen to homeless people, to be more effective and compassionate in their dealings with homeless people. The police respect Margaret because she shows up. She's raising their consciousness. The

homeless people respect Margaret because she shows up for them. Do you know that there are homeless people who have joined Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church? Some have been baptized into the Christian faith. It's so interesting. Margaret's style is not theological. It's interrogative. She helps people ask questions and homeless people have many questions about God. She creates an atmosphere where they can ask those questions. It's faith seeking understanding.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury said, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel and use words only when absolutely necessary." Don't ever forget that. Margaret Shafer is showing up in the difficult places of life. She's showing up in times and places where she is needed. James says that we are to wake up and to show up. He also says we are to speak up.

SPEAK UP

Through the Partnership of Faith group in New York City, I work with Jews and Muslims and Christians. We have three rabbis, three imams, a number of Protestant pastors, and a number of Roman Catholic priests. We all meet together. Do you know why the group works? It works because we don't try to water down what we believe. I want to know what the imams believe. I have not studied The Koran and I would like to know from the imams what does The Koran say. I want to know from the rabbis why is there so much fighting in the Middle East over land. Why is the land so important? What does your tradition teach us? And the imams and the Jews have questions for the Christians too. They want to know about the cross.

When Mel Gibson's *The Passion* was on everyone's mind there were many questions for us about the cross. They asked about what we as Christians believe that leads to salvation. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "We always pay dearly for chasing after what is cheap." When you water down your faith, you cheapen it. Oh we could say that we all believe the same thing, but that wouldn't be honest. What's great about the Partnership of Faith is that I am a Christian and Peter Rubinstein is a Jew and Imam Taleeb is a Muslim and we all exist side by side but we are true to our own traditions and we respect our differences. If we weren't, it wouldn't work.

I also learned this two days after September 11, 2001 when Jan Ammon, Randy Weber, Oscar McCloud and I went to the Plaza Hotel. Taped all over the walls of the ballrooms were pictures of missing people. Most of them were under 30 years of age. Below each picture was the name of the missing person and then the cell phone number of a relative. As far as your eye could see there were pictures of hundreds of missing persons. We went to the ballroom where the Cantor Fitzgerald Corporation had their headquarters. Imagine mothers

and fathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, grandparents and friends and children wandering all over the city, some visiting hospitals and morgues, looking for their loved ones. At the end of every afternoon the president of Cantor Fitzgerald would come to one of us and ask, "Is there anyway you could put together a little religious service?" We met with the rabbis and the imams and we would plan a little service. I learned a lot about the Christian faith on those days.

They would say to me, every time, "We'll begin and we'll do the middle but would you do the end? You choose the scriptures at the end. You choose the music for the end. You give the message at the end." I said, "I'm honored to do that. I'm glad to do that but why did you ask me to do that?" And they said, "Because what we hear from Christians seems to be a word of hope and we think these people need a word of hope." I felt this was a time to wake up, show up and speak up. So as best as I could, taking the other traditions into consideration, I tried to share authentically why I'm hopeful - that the cross is empty, that Jesus isn't there, that God raised Jesus from the dead. After I spoke at the Central Park service for the 780 Cantor Fitzgerald people who lost their lives, many people came up to me and wanted to talk about faith. They wanted to know what it means to be a Christian.

How is there hope in this seemingly hopeless world? Jan, Randy, Nora and Oscar and I have spent hours talking to people who are non-Christians about what we believe as Christians in a way in which they could ask questions. Many of them are professing faith. There is a time to wake up and put God number one in your life. I hope today is your wake up call. There is a time to show up and let your life and your witness do the talking. There is a time to speak up and say what we as Christians believe is unique about the gospel.

Desmond Tutu did that. I put the quote on the front cover of the bulletin so you can take it with you. Tutu was at a meeting with the minister of law and order of South Africa who, pardon my vernacular, wanted Tutu to shut up. Tutu kept speaking up. He kept saying apartheid is wrong. Apartheid violates the gospel. He thought I'm going to lift up the name of Jesus Christ and be a peacemaker in this situation, but they continued to try to silence him. Finally he said, "Mr. Minister, with all respect, you are a man and not God. You are but a faint scribble on the pages of history, but Jesus Christ and his name will live forever." I take other religions very seriously but I think Tutu is right. Some day every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until then, we at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church are called to wake up, to show up and, for Christ's sake, to speak up.

A-men

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD or cassette tape .
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