



HOLLYWOOD
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CROSSFLIX SERIES – “EASY A”

July 31, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: James 1: 19-27

Don't you forget about me... then the question comes, who are we? What is it that defines us? Is it our own inner sense of worth, our words, our daily actions, or is it the perception of others from which we determine our ultimate value?

We all long to be loved and appreciated for who we are... especially when we are wrestling with all this in high school. They are just some of the themes from this morning's Crossflix film, Easy A. How many of you have seen it? I'm very excited about this afternoon's talkback with our own Bert Royal, who is the film's screenwriter. I'm not saying this because Bert is here, but because it's true: this is one of the finest written, multi-layered films that I've seen in a long time. In fact, I think there were at least 5 different sermons I envisioned before settling on the one you are hearing this morning. So don't be surprised if an illustration from "Easy A" pops up again in a sermon sometime soon.

What I want us to focus on today is the power -- and the limitations of our words— to hold those two things in tension. In this first clip, we will see the power that words have to shape perceptions of one another. Olive, a quiet unnoticed high school student, tells a little white lie about her weekend to her best friend Rhiannon, and is overheard by Marianne, the leader of the Christian club. Soon the news is all over the school.

Olive really tried to set the record straight with Marianne. But like all good gossips, Marianne saw no need for the facts to interfere with her narrative.

The writer of the book of James knew that it would be difficult for us Christians to change the narrative of our lives to fit the demands of the Gospel. He knew that it's far easier to say "I believe" than to have that belief manifest itself in our daily lives. To address that, the entire book of James is a down to earth, practical book that gives straightforward advice on how to live a life of faith.

And that's precisely why Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, hated it. Luther called the book of James an "epistle of straw," and not worthy of being included in the canon of scriptures. Although he eventually mellowed a bit on that stand, Luther worried that the book of James overemphasized doing good works and underemphasized God's grace – which if taken to its logical extreme, means that we as Christians will have all our focus on doing and none on the gift of Grace that God offers us.

Well, neither works nor grace seemed to be of utmost concern to the members of the Christian club. However, they did understand the power of words – the power of gossip – and the power of literature – and they combined them. As the English class studies Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Nina decides that Olive should also wear a scarlet A on her clothing, as a mark of her indiscretion. And as the rumors about Olive's supposed activities grow, Olive decides she could indeed pretend to play that part. And in so doing she finds she sort of likes the attention. Well, most of it.

Words matter. They have the power to lift up or tear down; they have the ability to inform or influence. Which is why James, in his little instruction book for the Christian life, tells us clearly how we are to communicate with each other.

James says: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along behind. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger.

Ok – truth be told – and I won't ask for a show of hands – how many of us, when we are in a conversation, are thinking about what we are going to say next instead of listening to the person speaking? Especially if we're irritated with him or her? Because we know our point is SO much better than the one they are making, right?

Active listening is hard, period, but here's why it's so important for us as Christians to be better listeners than speakers: there's a limit to the power that words, any words, have. Ultimately the limitations of our words are supplanted by the reality of our actions. And those actions, our daily lives, will either support or diminish the words of our mouths.

One scholar has written: *The author of James is aware that people sometimes confine their understanding of faith to a simple series of truth claims—something limited to their heads or their words. For James, this is inadequate. Throughout this letter, the faith that counts is the faith that is actually operative in a person's life.*¹

James tells us we are to be doers of God's word, not just hearers. And then he goes further, saying – and I love this translation from the Message, because we can really relate to it --

Anyone who claims to be "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air.

Now Olive doesn't know the difference between hot air religion and James' mandate for us to live out our faith, not just give it lip service. But here's what she does know: she's gotten really good at pretending to – you know – with all sorts of boys, mostly because they have played on her sympathies and convinced her that to do so would help THEM even at her own expense. From Brandon, who was tired of being bullied for being gay, to the lonely loveable loser who couldn't get a date, to other boys who would give her gift cards... to finally she agrees to cover for Mrs. Griffith, who is having a "thing" with Marianne's boyfriend, the co-leader of the Christian club. Olive's motives – and her ethics -- are at best mixed; she's getting a lot more attention than before, but she finds herself lonelier than before as well. When it's clear that the Christian club won't stop harassing her, Olive decides to find out what motivates their assault of words.

One preacher has said: *Someone said rightly that it is easier to believe than to be. Which means it is always easier to talk about Jesus than it is to follow Him. It's easier to discuss love than it is to share it. It's easier to make promises than it is to keep them. Our actions determine whether we mean what we say.*²

I thought about that a lot this week as we've seen Congress debate the debt ceiling, the deficit, and the national budget in general. There's been a lot of words, haven't there? And they've made us nervous. At least, they've made me nervous. But here's the bottom line, as Jim Wallis of Sojourners has so correctly reminded us this week: the moral measure of any budget is how it treats the poor. So what matters is not the political posturing, or spinning from either side; what matters is not who can talk the loudest or whip up enough votes. What matters in our national policies are the consequences for the least among us. What matters is how the poor are treated by those legislators who claim the mantle of Christianity. What matters is how we, as a community of faith, use both the power of words and the substance of our actions to bring forth justice for all God's children. That we don't stand off to the side when our brothers and sisters are in pain, but we are also wise and thoughtful in our actions.

The ultimate lesson of James is that everything we do, all of our words and actions, can either reflect the love and grace of God, or repudiate it. This final clip is perhaps my favorite of the entire movie, as it brilliantly illustrates the book of James on several levels.

Here are the Christians, inward focused as always, singing "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," out of touch and oblivious to the hurts of the world around them, especially Mr. Griffith, in shock upon learning in a not very tactful way that his wife has been unfaithful. And finally here is Olive, who to this point has been on the receiving end of hurtful words and actions – now realizes the damage that her own words have done to someone she truly cares about.

Brothers and sisters, as a community of faith, let us commit to three things this day.

1) watch the way we talk to one another, and about one another. We are a welcoming and inclusive congregation -- but even with that definition, sometimes we forget that we need to speak to each other with kindness. Sometimes we forget that our words can wound.

And frankly, if you don't have something nice to say about someone else, just don't say it. Now my roots are in the south, where we are always kind to one another's face but then turn and talk about them when they leave. I hear that happens in California on occasion. That's the sort of hot air religion that James was talking about. We are to be authentic and genuine with others by showing respect for one another.

2) actively listen and don't speak without having all the facts

In a congregation, or in the workplace, or in a neighborhood, we are bound to react to what we see – which may or not be all the facts. Marianne reacted to what she overheard; not to what she knew Olive to be. That set off the whole chain of events. We need to listen – really listen – to one another. And not be quick to judge, but only be quick to listen.

3) let us not be oblivious to the needs of others, and this world; let us use the power of our words and our actions to make a difference in the lives of others.

Yesterday Pauley, Chad and Joey delivered the many, many toys we collected for the children of Hope Gardens, a project of the Union Rescue Mission. *James calls that Real religion -- which reaches out to others, especially the homeless and the loveless.*

Brothers and sisters, that's how we want to be defined – as reflecting that real religion that reaches out and makes a difference in the lives of another; having our words and actions reflect the amazing love of God in Jesus Christ.

That's authentic, grace filled faith in Jesus Christ – and when we live that faith, that's the best way to be known, and to never be forgotten.

Amen.

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¹ Craig Koester, Commentary on James 1:17-27, August 30, 2009, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/30/2009&tab=3

² Maxie Dunnam, "Swift to Hear, Slow to Speak," 2006 sermon found at www.christianglobe.com