

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love; God’s ROI”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
August 9, 2015

James 1:17-27, Deuteronomy 14:28-29

It was the next to last job I had before going to seminary. I was working for an engineering firm that was designing a new refinery for Chevron. My job was to design, draw and detail the piping arrangement for the tank farm. The tank farm was the area where large tank like containers were arranged so that oil tankers could off-load their cargo and it could be stored prior to refining. The pay was excellent and I enjoyed the people I worked with. Then one day, the unexpected happened. I was called into the office of my boss’s boss, was handed an envelope and told that I was to clean out all of my drafting supplies because I was being let go. I say this was a shock because my boss had entrusted me with tasks beyond my pay-grade because he trusted me. As I was leaving with my pink slip and severance, my boss’s boss, said, “Oh you’re being let go because Chevron is shutting down the entire project. They decided that it was not worth the investment.” As an economics major I got it. The return in their investment was not adequate to continue the project.

Return on investment, or ROI, is part and parcel of the business world. I would guess that many of you at one time or another were part of the process of deciding which projects did or did not have an adequate ROI in order to proceed. But the interesting thing about ROI is that it is not limited to the business world. In fact we are engaged in determining the return on our investment on an almost daily basis. We make a decision to go out to dinner or go eat at home. In so doing we assess the return on the money we will spend at restaurant. Will the meal be worth it? We are going to decide if we will redo our kitchen. The old one works fine, but we believe that the return on our investment in terms of more counter space and better appliances means our ROI is on target. We know that the dream cruise is coming and we know a friend of a friend who has a completely restored 55 Chevy coupe for sale, yes this is my dream, and so we have to decide if the return of driving down Woodward at 10 miles per hour will be worth it. So return on investment is something that we all do, all the time, and interestingly enough, so too does God.

Our passage out of James this morning is all about God’s desire for a return on the investment that God has made in the world. How so? Let’s look at the text. James begins by reminding us that God invests in us. We are told that all good gifts come from God. The impression we are to take from these words has to do with the good gifts of life; the earth, the sky, the stars, the rain, food upon our tables and the like. God’s people are to remember that all that they have, they have because God has invested in us. Without God’s help as creator and sustainer of the world, we would have nothing. The second way in which God invests in the world is through implanting the word. I realize that this is an odd sounding term. Yet for James and his audience the reference would be clear. The implanted word is the implanted presence of Jesus Christ in their, and in our, lives. For you see James understands that what causes one to follow Jesus is not simply that we like his teachings, but that God has literally

implanted, through the Spirit, the very presence of Jesus Christ in us. And because God has done so, we become capable of being new people; new people who can give God a return on this investment.

We begin to get a sense of the kind of return that God desires in verse 18 when James writes, “In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” First fruits within the Jewish tradition were the best that anyone had to offer. Thus James is telling us that we are to be the best creatures that God has created. We are to be the exemplars. And what that means for James is not that we are in church every Sunday but that we exhibit a particular kind of life and become a particular kind of people. Being this kind of people means being slow to speak, slow to anger, ridding ourselves of habits that harm others, and strive to allow the implanted word, the presence of Jesus Christ to lead us. What it also means is that we will strive for true religion. OK, I want to pause here for an explanation. For most of us, religion means a set of beliefs or doctrines that are associated with God or the gods. Being a religious person means believing certain things. In the first century, this was not the case. Religion was a set of practices. To be religious meant to practice certain cultic rituals. It meant going to a particular temple and giving an offering. It meant participating in a particular festival. Therefore when James talks about true religion he is referring to a particular set of practices...namely, caring for the most vulnerable, widows and orphans, and not allowing society to dictate what we do. These were the returns God expected to come out of God’s investment in the world.

I realize that at this moment there are some among you who are a bit uncomfortable with this analogy of God desiring a return on God’s investment. I say this because every time in my ministry that I preach from James with his emphasis on doing, some people are concerned. They are concerned because they have come out of more legalistic Christian traditions in which one’s salvation was always at risk based upon one’s actions. So questions such as the following arise. “How much return on God’s investment does God want?” What happens if I do not return an adequate investment? Will God send me packing?” “Is God’s love contingent on the return that I give to God?” “What happens to the grace that I so desperately desire from God?” “Is this salvation by works and not by grace?” In other words there is an inner struggle about am I being good enough, doing enough, loving enough or serving enough to be acceptable to God? What I want to let you know this morning is that this passage has nothing to do with salvation, but with transformation.

As I have often said, what God desires is that all human beings become particular kinds of people (those who love God and neighbor) creating particular kinds of communities (where all persons are loved and accepted and the grace of Jesus Christ is shown), in order to help create a new world (in which all persons share in the peace and bounty that God desires for them). This is the direction in which James is headed and he understands that without doing, without putting into practice what Jesus and the prophets taught, it is impossible for people, communities and the world to be changed. This is why he uses the analogy of the face and the mirror. The connection is that if all we do is hear what Jesus teaches we will forget it. If we come to church and hear but do not do we will not be changed by what we have heard. If on the other hand we do what Jesus and the prophets taught, then we will become new people, capable of making new communities and perhaps, with God’s help, a new creation. Doing then is not about salvation, about being good enough or working hard enough to be

loved and saved by God. It is about us becoming who God wants us to be. This is the return on investment that God is looking for.

She grew up in a working class family. After completing high school, college and law school she came to Detroit to work for the Tigers negotiating contracts with their players. Unlike many of us who live in the burbs and work in the inner city she chose to live in Detroit...in fact to live next door to a women's shelter. Over time she befriended many of the women who stayed there. One day as she was running she noticed that there were buildings where the graffiti was sloughing off the bricks. She picked some up and wondered if she could make jewelry out of it. She knew something about jewelry because she had paid her way through college by making it. As she discovered it would make great jewelry she also wondered how this discovery could help others. Teaming with a new found friend they raised capital and created Rebel Nell jewelry. Then Amy Peterson, hired some of the women from the shelter to work for her with this as their mission, "employ disadvantaged women in Detroit, to educate them on financial management, life wellness and business, and to empower them to successfully transition to an independent life." After two years the company was turning a profit and God was seeing a return on God's investment in remaking people.

I realize that few of us can found a Rebel Nell, but all of us can in one way or another offer God a return on the investment that God has made in us. The question I would pose to you is this, "What return am I making on all that God has invested in me?"