

**Title: Let endurance have its full effect**

**Date: October 2017 - Pacific Southwest Regional Gathering**

**By Rev. April Lewton, NBA Vice President of Development and Marketing**

**James 1: 2-4**

*My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*

This year, 2017, marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation! It was October 31, 1517, the monk, priest, and Bible scholar Martin Luther, nailed 95 theses or statements to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany. This matters because Luther's writings – full of theological questions and criticisms aimed directly at the Catholic Church and the Pope in particular – began a revolutionary movement that helped to birth Protestant Christians.

The mention of all this, though, is not to begin an exploration into the history of Christian thought. Rather, we recall this important intellectual and religious leader, Martin Luther, because he did not think much of the book of James. In fact, he called James an "epistle of straw" (and I'm told by friends and family who speak Spanish that to say something is "full of straw," *paja*, is the polite way of calling something "bull poop"... to say it politely in English). In fact, Luther questions whether the book of James should have even been included in the Bible at all because its message contradicts the Apostle Paul's teachings in his letter to the Romans on justification by faith alone.

You see, for Luther, the core of Christian salvation was not faith AND works (or any type of actions done by humanity that might look as if we thought we could earn or win over God's grace). *We cannot win God's grace.*

For Luther, there is **only** faith as a radical and abiding trust in God, no matter what, and any good works or action on our part was to be always directed to others, not toward God. We show acts of love to stranger, neighbor, enemies, and friends. According to Luther, we are called to be a Christ to others as God through Jesus is Christ to us. James's letter, for Luther, smacks too much of works over faith, over the "by faith alone" of Paul's letter to the Christians of Rome.

However, if **we** are to be truly Protestants and honor Luther's cry of *sola scriptura*, "scripture alone," we cannot simply ignore the parts of the Bible that cause us discomfort and tension (*and we don't*). We must hold Luther and our other Protestant leaders accountable to the whole Bible. You see unlike Paul, **James** holds together--or perhaps better said, holds in tension--faith and works, faith and action. James introduces us to faithful acting, to moral thinking; James, like the book of Proverbs, is part of our Christian wisdom literature. Further on in this opening chapter, the authors of this letter writes about wisdom, doubt, and temptation; all inherently human and complex traits and characteristics.

So, imagine if you would, the date is around 70 C.E. somewhere on the desert plains of Syria (*because this is the time and place in which this text is written*). The time is dusk at the end of a long day. The sheep have been fed; the daily chores are done; the children are starting to look weary and ready for sleep; everyone is gathered around, and the storyteller reads the following...

*...whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance (James 1: 2 – 3)*

Our modern response would likely be picking up one's phone and quickly typing *#forreal*? Is our scripture truly saying, do not complain of our suffering? Are we really to never speak of unhappiness or sorrow?

***We are the vessels of our ancestors, we are fruits from the vine***

In my work with the National Benevolent Association, our Disciples health and social service general ministry, I have the opportunity and the privilege to meet many wonderful people. I visit Disciples congregations and offer thanks for the financial gifts that you give to Disciples Mission Fund, our common mission fund of the church. I visit with our ministry affiliates, the Disciples nonprofits and leaders that **your gifts are supporting**, and who are providing *amazing care*, *direct advocacy*, and *offering* health-related services each and every day. (We have over 40 Disciples-related health and social service ministries!) I also connect with annual giving and planned gift donors, generous folk who invest in the NBA with gift annuities, or who include us in their wills, or who open long-term endowed trusts that benefit all of *our* collective, NBA ministries. In the midst of all these introductions and meetings with new and old friends, it is inevitable that I get asked the question,

*Friend: So, where are you from?*

My response: I live and work out of Alexandria, Virginia, for NBA staff does not have a single, central office. Yet, rather for the 18 of us on staff\*\* we work from home offices that allows us to connect with Disciples all across our church and we lean into technology like video conferencing and webinars to meet and share ideas.

*Friend: Oh, wow! But, where are you really from?*

For people of color, you all know, this sometimes is a common question that we hear. If I could, I would share this picture shown here (*gesture to screen*) as part of my response to this blunt question about origins and heritage.

While I am 1.5 generation immigrant, Filipina-American, half of my bloodline comes from the Igorot people. Igorots are one of the seven indigenous tribes of the Philippines, which the U.S. acquired along with Puerto Rico and Cuba at the end of the Spanish-American war in 1898. In 1904, when the U.S. hosted the World's Fair, a large international event that was created to showcase the hosting nation's achievements, Igorot Filipinos – along with 10 different ethnic Filipino groups – made up the largest, 47-acre exhibit of the 1904 World's Fair. Around 1,000 Filipinos were corralled and shipped like cargo to St. Louis, Missouri, where for seven months they were on display for attendees of the World's Fair to stroll by and to observe them wearing their tribal costumes often simple weavings or loincloths, living in their huts, and watching them do activities like hunt or cook around open fire. For seven months, including the cold and winter season, my people were on display as part of the American achievement of “civilizing our brown sisters and brothers.” And, then, at the end of the World's Fair, the exhibit was torn down and my people were left stranded here in the U.S. with no employment, no resources, no homes and so they built shanties or shacks to live in what is still today known as Dogtown in St Louis. This image and this story of the Igorot Filipinos...this is part of who I am, this is part of where I come from.

With stories and experiences of communities before us such as I have just shared, we come to an understanding that we are vessels of our ancestors and that we truly are fruits of the vine. Through stories and even loaded silences in our families, our bodies carry the scars and wounds of the generations before us. We carry their DNA in our tissue and blood; we carry the susceptibility for cancer or other terminal diseases; we carry the propensity for depression, schizophrenia, and other mental illnesses; we embody the stories of injustice, slavery, migrant labor, the slaughtering of indigenous populations, and the brutality of white colonial power and privilege.

In a strange way, when James says, “consider it nothing” or no need to speak about your suffering; my friends, we don’t even have to open our mouths to name our suffering. Our physical bodies already bear the wounds, weaknesses, and susceptibilities of our sufferings...

***We are the vessels of our ancestors, we are the fruits of the vine.***

In her chapter, “Cooking Without Recipes,” from the book entitled *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology*, Disciples’ theologian, Rita Nakashima Brock, writes,

*As inheritors of [the] Puritan legacy [that radical, religious group that colonized what we now know as our beloved U.S.], we, as Americans live by myths of pristine beginnings, noble founding fathers, and the belief that Americans are always on the side of what is right<sup>1</sup> ....[Rita calls it our]...imperialist nostalgia.*

Yet, the focus of James, and especially the verses chosen by the planners of our regional event today, goes beyond tolerating suffering. James calls us to attention with the commandment, *let endurance have its full effect*. Is endurance what brought you here today? Many months ago when I received the invitation to be with you all and to speak, several of the conversations that I had included how we are “living in tension; a lot of tension.” Yet, do we really know what causes us sorrow or what hurts our hearts and souls? May I remind you that as people of faith, when we gather together whether in worship or even in social fellowship, the power of God and that which brings us together allows us, calls us--in fact, demands us--to ask each other meaningful questions. And, so, I invite you...

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<sup>1</sup> “Cooking without Recipes: Interstitial Integrity,” *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology*. Nakashima Brock, Rita, eds. Westminster John Knox Press. 2007. Pg 128.

*Turn to your neighbor, preferably one you did not come with today. Turn to your neighbor, look into their eyes and inquire, “why did you say ‘yes’ to coming today? What are the tensions that are real and live for you right now?”*

< *Call people back together* > Thank you for taking a moment to get to know more about what is real tension or sorrow in each of our lives. Maybe there was something that you heard or a conversation which you began that you can continue more of throughout today; for we as a beloved community, we come with our whole selves...

*We are the vessels of our ancestors, we are the fruits of the vine.  
And, as people of faith, we are called to not be satisfied with simple questions and simple answers.*

The fact that we gather under a theme about our lived “tension” means that we must be brave enough to speak and we must be brave enough to listen to the tensions in our midst. Church is not a place for us to come and only talk about the weather. This is the place in our lives that we get to ask “what causes your sorrow? And, what do you lament?”

This morning, as you prepare for attending workshops, listening to speakers, and gathering ideas and new ways of doing ministry, you are invited to bring your whole selves into this space. You’ll spend time looking outwards towards the world and local communities and the ways that you and the church can compassionately serve and advocate. You are invited, though, to also consider internally and personally, where do you, but also we, need reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness so that all may truly allow the enduring love of God to have its full effect. Because it is in that action, in those works, in the not ignoring but faithful leaning into those tensions, that James is telling us that we may indeed find joy and the transforming light of God’s glory.

Go in peace and power into **this** day! May it be so.

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**Part II**

This year – in addition to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation! – this was also the 130<sup>th</sup> year of ministry for the National Benevolent Association. Our origin story involves 6 women in 1886, who gathered in a church basement in St Louis to pray and discern about how to address the needs they saw in their communities, which at the time was right in the heart of the industrial revolution. They wanted to make a difference in the lives of orphan children, for young unwed mothers, for people with disabilities that were not being served, and for seniors that they thought were being forgotten in their old age. It is their prayers and their resilience that birthed the NBA.

Yet, becoming a formal part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was a long tedious journey. Even though they received “little male encouragement,” the founders’ goal was not “women organizing women to do women’s work.” These women aimed to “galvanize a whole denomination to restore the early church’s concern for the helpless to the center of its spiritual life.”

Mattie Younkin, the first ordained woman Disciples minister in Missouri, nagged the chairmen of conventions to get five minutes, even three minutes, to say something about Benevolence, a time when that theme was not recognized...At one state convention a preacher, refusing her permission to speak, blurted out, “There is not time to hear you (woman)— we are here to preach the Gospel!” (Inasmuch, NBA p33.)

“In 1895, the women succeeded in getting the General Convention in Dallas to consider a petition to recognize the NBA as an official agency of the church, only to have a hostile majority table the resolution. According to the association’s magazine, ‘elders, ministers, and convention managers, who saw no place for a woman in the program of the church,’ battled her again and again.”

“The beginning of NBA owed far more to the tenacity of these women who battled considerable odds than it did to enthusiastic recognition from Christian congregations across the country.” (Inasmuch, p30, 33.)

For these tenacious Disciples women—you could say *‘they were warned; they were given an explanation; nevertheless, they persisted.’*

It took 12 years — even after their Missouri state charter was granted—that the resolution was passed, recognizing the National Benevolent Association and its ministry as an important part of the Christian Church. After a three-year battle with cancer, Sarah Matilda Hart Younkin died on October 13, 1899—just days before this Convention resolution passed. Needless to say, “not all who began the journey together lived to see its completion.” This is part of the NBA’s story and history about endurance and faithful witness. We give thanks for 130 years to celebrate and to keep doing this kind of ministry!!

When we consider endurance, let us look towards the third chapter of James, beginning with verse 4:

*[L]ook at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong wind to drive them, ...they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.*



James seems to be referencing another well-known scripture, Matthew 18, which conveys “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I...” Or, where 6 women in a prayer circle seek to make a difference...

Or, with the number of people gathered in this place, what is possible from the positive energy of this time?

Or, with the 100 Disciples congregations in southern California, Nevada, and Hawaii, how are we being called by our scriptures, and in our faith to bring about peace, reconciliation, and justice in communities together?

A few years back, when NBA was in the midst of strategic visioning and planning, we kept coming back to the question of, “how can NBA support and encourage health and social service ministry and work across the life of our church?” What and how do we need to be church?

After 130 years of ministry, there were many strong historic ministries of care that we just needed to help share their story. Places like Tennyson Center for Children serving children in crisis, Woodhaven providing housing and safe community for adults with disabilities, and Christian Services for Children in the heart of Selma, Alabama, offering courses and workshops in sound parenting and family reunification to name only a few of these ministries. For NBA, our call *was and is* to help amplify the stories and impact that is happening in so many communities. We also turned our attention to supporting emerging health and social service projects. With Larry and Ayanna leading the charge, we provide encouragement and tools for folks like Dean and Mission Behind Bars and Beyond in Kentucky that help train congregations and churches to safely and meaningfully receive people into community after they completed their time in prison and jail. And, we support amazing leaders like your own Nora, Al, and Stephen, as they build “beloved community” in East Pomona at Urban Mission. Through our NBA Incubate initiative, we very much want to empower and support Disciples already doing amazing things.

And, of course, NBA leaned into the church wide call for us to support and strengthen young Disciples through what we now lovingly reference as NBA XPLOR. We are grateful for faithful folk like Pastor Bob and Pastor Louise and so many leaders at North Hollywood Christian Church, Sandra Bryant and the amazing work and support of staff at All Peoples Community Center, and East Whittier Christian Church with the support of Pastors Siobhi and Gabriel – these are names and communities that have taken seriously the work of nurturing and accompanying our young Disciples into lives of service and compassion. For three years, an NBA XPLOR house and Residents lived and worked in simple community.

In asking the sacred and strategic question of “how can we support health and social service ministry,” it became so abundantly clear that as, NBA, we have what we need already in our communities and in our midst to make such meaningful difference!

Returning again to James though, we hear how the scriptures reference maturity and lacking in nothing. As people of faith and as the Disciples Church, we indeed have what we need to make meaningful change, transformation, and justice. While we have the tensions of our global world and social and cultural challenges, we *also* have the beauty of our shared communion table and the grace and peace that comes from breaking bread and sharing the cup of life together. This summer at our General Assembly, after we elected our new General Minister and President, Rev. Terri Hord Owens, I heard her say that she goes with the grace of God and the accompaniment of all of us as Disciples in community into those hard, hard places; into the conversations that can break up families, marriages, and relationships; into the social political issues that so divide us in our voting booths and Sunday morning talk shows. For Rev. Owens, she is only able to serve as our General Minister and President because she goes with us and we accompany her in the many prayers she offers, statements and speeches that she gives, and meeting and communion tables at which she represents and goes on our behalf.

It has been said that to talk about religion and our values that we hold so dear is to play with fire. As people of faith, we play with fire every day when we demand justice and righteousness for all. When we say that our Table and our doors are open to all who seek to be in relationship with the Divine, that is fire for others yet everyday lived faith for who we are. When your churches or your Region hosts events and gatherings to talk about dismantling structural racism and being agents of anti-oppression, that is like flammable gas for some in our society and topics that are still considered shocking or taboo, or even worse, unnecessary. Yet, in order for God's endurance to have its full effect in our lives and in the whole of Creation and the world, we must continue to put our heads, hearts, hands, and communities together to be the body of Christ with and for each other.

Hear me that I am not saying that as people of faith and as church, we have it all figured out. We wouldn't be gathering under the theme, Living in Tension, if we did!

On the contrary, the power of Eucharist and communion is, of course, the ability to connect with God in a tangible, representative way. Communion is also, in the words of Rita Nakashima Brock, a time that we can be "re/membered" or put back together after acknowledging and confessing to the forces in life that dis-member us or that pull us apart. We are not immune from influences that divide us. We know too well the ways that we can be overbearing, forgetful, or just not aware. This again is where the words of James call our attention to the everyday. We must be mindful to be faithful and attentive in both the common and in the special, extraordinary moments. Today, in your workshops, conversations, and planning, these could be considered commonplace moments yet the kind of significant results of impact and advocacy will be anything but. Your energy and ideas will bless the lives of many.

As a closing reflection, I ask us to consider the onion. Not the publication that is about news and satire that, at one time, published news that was both real and fiction. The onion that I ask us to consider is the vegetable most used as the basis for so many recipes and cuisines. What would your abuelita, lola, nonna, or halmeoni do without the onion for their dish? The Chilean poet and politician, Pablo Neruda, wrote *Oda a la Cebolla* (or Ode to the Onion) in his book of poetry, *Odes to Common Things*:

*Onion,  
Shining flask,  
Your beauty assembled petal by petal...  
Generously  
You give up  
Your balloon of freshness...  
[we] proclaim how your influence  
livens the salad's love...  
praising your chopped brightness  
upon the halves of the tomato.  
But within people's reach,  
Showered with oil,  
Dusted with a pinch of salt,  
You satisfy the worker's hunger  
Along the hard road home...  
You made us weep without suffering.  
[We] praise every living thing, onion,  
but [to us] you are  
more beautiful than a bird,...  
to my eyes you are a  
heavenly balloon, a platinum cup,  
a (beautiful) dance.  
The fragrance of the earth is alive (because of)  
your crystalline (and everyday) nature.*

Remind us, oh God, that our faith and actions as your people be as common and as special as the onion. No matter how many ways we may feel chopped and divided, our intentional presence and faithful witness bring about real love and compassion in the world. Even in the midst of the fullness and the tensions of the world, encourage us to be Christ-like for each other – to compassionately listen, to advocate alongside, and to help hold one another accountable and honest. Allow us to be open to both vulnerabilities and transformations, so that we can be made whole at your Table and in community together. Make us remember that we are never alone and that only in our fellowship, worship, and faithful leaning into our tensions can we truly develop into your beloved community. In the name of a living Christ, may all this be so. Amen.