II Kings 4:1-7, James 1:26-27

“Caring for our mothers”

 I love mother’s day. As kids my mom used to put her feet up and we four boys would try to make dinner for her and take care of things around the house for that one day. We didn’t do a great job, but there was always that smile on her face that looked a lot like pride. I used to buy cut flowers for Stacy, but now we have migrated to live plants. One mother’s day in Russia I went to buy her 4 flowers, one for her and one each for the girls. It was early on in our time in Russia and so I really didn’t know much at all. I got there and asked for 4 and they refused. They said no, that I could understand. The woman help out 3 fingers on one hand and 5 on another. So I held out 4 on my hand and she shook her head and lifted up the 3 and the 5 again.

 So I pointed to the three, and she sold me three flowers. Then I held up a 1 and she sold me one flower. Apparently they think it is bad luck if you sell an even number of flowers. What we do and what we go through in order to take care of those who take care of us.

 But mother’s day is primarily a secular holiday. We have quite a few of those, don’t we. Except for Christmas and Easter being pretty much the only Christian holidays that we celebrate in this country, pretty much all the others are secular. But there are a whole variety of Scripture that speak to the blessedness of mothers. The classic Scripture is Proverbs 31:10-31 which I’ve preached on before for mother’s day where it states: “Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too and he praises her.”

 In the New Testament we have the mother of Jesus upon hearing that she is about to become a mother she proclaims: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” But I have to admit this Scripture is not traditionally used for mother’s day, in fact you would be hard pressed to find any Scripture appropriate in the book of James. Except maybe, just maybe, the ones that we are going to read this morning.

 Just as a reminder, who was James’ mother? That’s right, Mary. James had an incredible mom, a true servant of the Lord. A mom that some denominations nearly deify while other seem to take pleasure in vilifying. We do honor our mother’s today and normally it is in lightof thinking of all the ways they have helped us in life.

 But James approaches this topic of giving thanks to others in a different light. He sees true thanksgiving not in a card or in a phone call, but in service, in physically caring for our moms, as they have physically cared for us. Let’s see if we can get a mother’s day sermon out of these verses.

 **READ**

So to start, as we typically do, we have to get to the Scripture and understand what James is saying in these last verses of chapter 2 and then mothers we will get to you after that. It was hard writing this sermon while watching the draft. Congratulations to Matt Feiler who is heading to Houston as an undrafted free agent. We only have two verses to look at but they are so different from each other that they provide us a nice and neat framework in which to explain what James is trying to get across.

 Verse 26 lays out for us what not to do if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and it is then juxtaposed with verse 27 which tells us what a true disciple in Jesus Christ actually should do. In these verses do you see which word is used more than any other word, at least which significant word is used more than any other? Religion is used 3 times and when it is used it depicts the outward practice or activity of a person in relationship to God.

 Today, and ever since the Jesus Movement that has been around for decades there has been a real aversion to the term religious. I’m not religious, I just love Jesus, you’ve heard people say that. But so much of who we are is lived out in a community that a strict individualistic approach is not appealing to me. When we eliminate the term religion we might as well eliminate the term church, which some would not like. The common aspect of our faith is equally important to our individual relationship with Jesus Christ. So if you love Jesus, vs. 26 states, if you think you are religious but speak bad about a neighbor, a family member, a co-worker, a member of the church, if you gossip, then your relationship with Jesus is more than compromised, it is worthless. Ouch, now that hurts.

 It really isn’t all that bad, is it? What are a few words? If you think you are religious, and when church is over you go into Fellowship Hall without having invited a visitor to go with you, or if you see someone by themselves in the Hall and choose to remain to speak to those that you speak with every week, then what is our faith saying? This is the do not of these two verses, don’t think you are religious if you can’t control your tongue or if you deceive yourself by your actions.

 Now the do portion in vs. 27. Religion is this, true religion, the kind we ought to emulate. Don’t you love it when things are clear in Scripture, and here James gives us 2 things we need to do in order to fulfill a true path in life that is pleasing to Jesus Christ. 1) Care for orphans and widows in their distress, and 2) keep yourself unspoiled by the world.

 Care for orphans and widows. On Monday evening Rosaria Vincenzi will come and speak to us and she is someone I’ve known for 20 years. She has been a literal mother to orphans in Italy for the last 47 years. As an orphan herself as her single mom dropped her off at Casa Materna, a Methodist orphanage in the heart of Naples which was starving post WWII, she grew up knowing what it meant to be an orphan and how to put into action Scriptural commands.

 Scripture is filled with this specific command to care for the orphans and the widows. We find it in Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 10, and 24, Psalm 68, Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 5, Ezekiel 22, Zecherian 7. Scripture tells us to care for the defenseless, over and over and over again. In our first reading we find Elisha helping out a widow, and her two children were about to be sold into slavery, so on the brink of becoming orphans. Both bases are covered here and again one of many examples of Scripture that address this specific issue.

 James tells us true religion has nothing to do with this sanctuary, with how Fellowship Hall looks, with the worship that we prefer, if we don’t devote our lives to the orphan and the widow, to the most defenseless in our society. The most difficult aspect of ministry over these past three years has been my professional transition from pastoral work in Moscow to pastoral work here in Strasburg. It is hard to adjust from going to making decisions with God’s blessing and guidance that could literally be life and death for someone receiving medical care at our medical clinic or deciding whether or not to buy a plane ticket home to Nigeria for the woman who was trafficked to Moscow.

 You see, God doesn’t want us to pay for others to minister as a substitute for our own personal service. But nevertheless, we may have to hire a nursery worker because we just can’t find the people to volunteer, and we have tried for 3 years to do it. It is possible for a church to be so taken up with the beauty of its buildings and the splendor of its worship that it has neither the time nor the money for practical Christian service.

 If nothing else James tells us today to care for others as our mothers have cared for us. This weekend LBC had its graduation and Brett Foote was one of the graduates. It was great meeting his family and spending some time with them. The keynote speaker was Joni Erikson Tada who has no biological children of her own. But as she spoke to the graduates she gracefully transformed into this incredible matriarch who was able to implant wisdom from her life experiences upon these her spiritual children. It was incredible to watch her and see the reaction of the graduates as they hung on her every word.

 She showed a truth that you don’t have to be a biological mom in order to be a mother figure that teaches, inspires, uplifts and not with her words, but as James states, with her lifelong actions of advocacy for the voiceless and the powerless. We have a number of women like that in our congregation who quietly make things happen behind the scenes without talking about anyone, but just getting the job done.

 Caring for our mothers, acting on behalf, as James states, thos who may be in distress just as our mothers cared for us. Some of us have lost our mothers. Others of us are caring for our mothers as they enter the later stages of life. Today serves as a day that we remember with gratitude those women who truly are the MVP’s of our life.

 This past week Kevin Durant gave us all wonderful mother’s day material. Kevin Durant is the reigning MVP of the NBA, for professional basketball.

 I would like to mimic Mr. Durant and ask that we give a standing ovation for all the women here in this church, for their sacrifices, their time, their care. We have one another for you, we have a flower for you, but please take our gratitude.

Amen.