

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 22
August 30, 2009

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

This morning, I have decided to do something that borders on being unlutheran. I am going to preach on a section of the book of James. Why, you might ask, is that unlutheran? Well, for starters, Martin Luther said that the epistle (or book) of James was an “epistle of straw”.

He went on to say, “it was easily consumed by fire, and when the straw was burned away, you did not have the pure gold nugget, the Gospel, remaining.” In other words, the Book of James did not have the gold nugget, according to Luther. It contained no Good News of the Gospel. Therefore, it was not worth much.

You see, the first reason that Luther did not like the Book of James is that Christ is not emphasized. As a matter of fact, Christ is only mentioned twice in the whole book. Also, in the Book of James, there is not one mention of the cross.

There is not one mention of Jesus dying of the cross to pay for our sins. There is not one mention of baptism – that those who believe and are baptized will be saved. There is not one mention of the word “grace,” and what grace means. Therefore, according to Luther, in James, there is no Christ, no grace, no Jesus dying for our sins, and no baptism.

The second reason that Luther was not a big fan of James was because of its emphasis on works.

For Luther, like the apostle Paul, emphasized that we are made right with God by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law. James, on the other hand, says that faith without works is dead. However, I do believe that James has something to say to us today.

So what was going on anyway in the community that James was writing to? Well, it seems that the Jewish Christians who were living outside of Palestine were separating faith in Christ, from charitable works of love. It can be determined that this community of believers was relatively wealthy.

For five paragraphs of his Epistle James addresses wealth within the Christian community, mostly, if not always, in a negative way. It appears that those who were wealthy Christians thought that it was enough just to have faith – to believe in Jesus.

They had no interest in putting that faith into action by “caring for orphans and widows in their distress.” They also had become quite “worldly” since James cautions them about being “stained by the world.”

Relatively speaking, there are more statements against wealthy Christians in the book of James than any other book in the Old or New Testament. You see, these wealthy congregations wanted to be recognized by their belief alone, and say; “Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I like going to church. Jesus, I love worshipping you. Jesus, I love seeing all my friends at worship. That is the true religion for us, to worship you with all of our friends.”

Does any of this sound familiar? Does it hit you in the gut like it hits me? Could James be speaking to us, here, in modern day Atascocita, Texas?

There is a story told of St. Francis of Assisi about when he was praying in an ancient church that was badly in need of repair. He heard a voice from a crucifix which was hanging over the altar which said, “Francis, go and repair my church that you see falling into ruin.” So Francis went to get his tool chest, but he soon realized that the voice of God was referring to something else.

The voice of God again said, “Not the bricks, Francis. The people are broken and in need of repair.” Then Francis understood, and went out and took care of the orphans and the widows.

James calls us to be doers of the word. In other words, put our faith into action. You see, for James, faith and works were two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other.

Therefore, he concludes this section of the epistle by saying, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Have you ever wondered what that Religion is, that James is talking about – religion that is pure and undefiled? Is there something inside of you that yearns to experience religion and spirituality that is real – that is genuine? Is there something inside of you that gets tired of “cheap” Christianity and craves something deeper?

Is there something inside of you that gets tired of a shallow faith that requires little of you and offers even less? Is there something inside of you that longs for meaning and purpose in life?

Albert Schweitzer was a renowned organist, pioneering New Testament scholar, and medical doctor. During a BBC interview late in his life, he was asked why he left his privileged life in Germany to serve at the Lambarene mission hospital buried in the jungles along the Ogowe river, deep in the Belgian Congo. He replied, “I have decided to make my life my argument. I have decided to make my life my argument”

As people of faith, we listen for God’s voice to discern what will make our lives matter. James defines “real religion” in terms of living a life that makes a difference. Specifically, making a difference for those who lack the power to change much by themselves.

Real religion makes you see others as God sees them, and makes you demonstrate active care for them as God does.

Of course, this is in direct opposition to what the world expects of us. The world takes a different view towards the overlooked, underestimated, passed-by, stepped-on people in society. In the world's eyes, such people are expendables, no names, no accounts, just statistics.

Believe it or not, such people populate our communities though they may be invisible to the privileged. But I know they exist, because I have met some of them.

An HIV-positive patient lacks insurance coverage for life-prolonging medications her doctor has prescribed. Alienated from her family and church, she is fearful and alone.

A preschooler has no one at home to read to him; his hardworking mother is one late rent payment away from homelessness. A child victim of physical or sexual abuse is "acting out" in school or at church. A toddler sleeps on the backseat of a daycare van unnoticed by a driver already late for his second job; the forecast calls for sunshine with highs in the 90's.

An undocumented alien who has traveled over two thousand miles, mostly on foot, in search of a better life and in hope of sending money home to his hungry family, finds himself too sick to work and unable to speak English.

A young father with a full-time, minimum-wage job finds his best efforts at supporting his family yields a salary about one-half the federal poverty line.

An older adult woman roasts in the summer heat without air conditioning, afraid to raise her window for threat of a break-in. A colleague is grieving the loss of her spouse, trying to be strong for her children, but overcome by sadness each day as she works. These are the orphans and widows of our day.

James calls us to look around us for the needy – those who cannot help themselves. God has not forgotten them. Indeed, James goes on to say; "God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom God promises to those who love him."

So how do you all of you feel right now. Perhaps you feel guilty, uncomfortable, or even angry? If so, angry at who? Or perhaps you feel challenged and inspired, ready to be a doer of the word to the best of your God given abilities? Or perhaps some of you might even feel that these words have been comforting?

So where do we go from here? I think that we can find a clue in what James said earlier, “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

What do you see when you look into the mirror? Most of us would probably not want to talk about it. But isn't it true that you see who you really are?

Ordinarily, we might see ourselves as thin or overweight, blemished, wrinkled, disheveled, or scarred. So we turn away from the mirror and try and forget who we really are. But what happens when we forget who we are? We also forget who God has called us to be.

We forget how much God has given us. We forget of God's love for us despite our flaws. We forget of God's promise to always be with us. And in doing so, our lives are reduced to a quest to get what we can, while we can.

We may find the situation of the orphan and the widow to be regrettable, but conclude that this is the way the world is, and we can't do anything about it.

So James says, “look at yourself again – go back to the mirror.” You are created in the image of God. You are loved. God has given his only Son so that you might have life. This is what we can never forget about ourselves. For if we forget, we will never be able to do what James calls us to do, and that is to be “doers of the word.”

Brothers and sisters, the world is watching, the need is great. Therefore, let us be who God has created us to be – not only believers of the word, but doers of the word.

And let us also remember that we don't have to be without blemish or fault ourselves in order to share God's love with others. If that were the case, none of us would do anything. So don't be afraid of the mirror. And always remember what you see. For it is out of our weaknesses that God works through us.

And in doing so, we too will experience the love and grace that can only be found in what James calls, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God." Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

Oh, by the way: "Pastor that was a wonderful sermon," said the parishioner at the door after worship, to which the Pastor replied, "That remains to be seen. That remains to be seen."
Amen.