

Pentecost 13B 2009
Proper 17
Texts: Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“But be doers of the word, and not merely, hearers.” James 1:22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Today we begin a five-week period where the Epistle reading comes from the Letter of James. I’ve never preached on James before, which is a shame because it is a great letter and has much to teach us. So I am going to remedy that oversight today.

The Letter of James is traditionally attributed to James, the brother of our Lord. James is known variably as James the Just, James of Jerusalem, and James, the first patriarch in the church in Jerusalem.

Although we don’t hear much about him that does not mean that he was inconsequential. In fact it is quite the opposite. He was the first leader of the fledgling church. He is considered one of the three pillars of the church along with Peter and John. Paul goes to him bringing the collection from the other churches to help the orphans and widows in Jerusalem. James is also the only apostle that Paul meets with after his conversion on the road to Damascus.¹

James was martyred around 62 C.E. The story is that he was at the Temple and when he refused to renounce Jesus he was thrown off the pinnacle of the Temple. When those responsible found him injured but still alive, they finished him off with clubs. If the attribution of this letter to him is correct then it had to be written earlier than the early 60’s.

The Letter of James was accepted as canon rather early on, but fell out of favor in the middle ages, due in no small part to Martin Luther. Luther really didn’t like the Letter of James. He didn’t like it because it

¹ Edward F. Marquart in www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_james_true_religion.

only mentions Jesus twice. He didn't like it because it does not talk about Jesus' life, death, resurrection or miracles. And he really, really didn't like it because he saw it as contradicting Paul's teaching of being saved by grace alone. Luther called the Letter to James, "an epistle of straw," meaning that when you burned everything away you had nothing left. Luther thought that the epistle spoke to what is known as "works righteousness." Works righteousness means that we are saved not by the grace of God, but by what we do. As long as we do good, regardless of the intention behind our acts, everything will be just fine.

Luther had every reason to be suspicious of works righteousness. It is a very powerful belief and it is one that certainly has taken hold in our day and time and in our culture. If I had a penny for every time I have heard, "I figure that if I do good and keep my nose clean that will be enough," I would be a rich woman. Doing good is necessary, but it is not enough. Doing good is not the same thing as having faith.

With all due respect to the great Reformer Martin Luther, who was certainly a more knowledgeable theologian than myself, I believe he was wrong. The Letter of James is not an epistle of straw, but an epistle of great price. I disagree that when you burn everything away there is nothing left. When the Letter of James is appreciated for its own sake one sees the gospel of Christ running through it in every verse.

The Letter of James is considered Christian wisdom literature. It was written for a general audience, not a particular community of faith facing issues particular to their community, as is the case with Paul's epistles. The Letter of James is a very practical teaching about how to live the Christian faith and life as a community that follows Jesus.

But James especially targets those communities that are compartmentalizing their faith from their everyday way of life. James writes that a community of faith cannot say one thing and do another. James writes that just to say you are religious doesn't cut it; unless your faith moves the community to acts of mercy and compassion then the faith the community proclaims means nothing.

"If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless," write James. It is not enough to think. Faith is not an assent to some theoretical ideas. Faith

that doesn't listen to the other, the pain and sorrow, the hopes and joys, isn't a real faith at all.

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.”

Real faith, pure religion, is the doing of acts of compassion. It is in the caring for those that are struggling to survive. Faith is an active pursuit not a passive thought process. Faith is a verb, not a noun.

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” For the early philosophers; Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, it was the thinking that elevated one and made one worthy. We are given quotes such as, “An unexamined life is not worth living,” and “I think, therefore I am.” But James motto is, “we love, therefore we act.” One writer states that hearing without acting is as different from hearing followed by action as a lightning bug is to lightning.²

Our acts, individually and communally, do not save our souls, only God can do that, but our acts of love and compassion show God to the world and are in direct response to the gifts that have been given to us.

I came across a quote the other day and I liked it so much I put it on my Facebook page. I wish I could tell you who penned it, but I don't know that. This quote summarizes all five chapters of James and speaks to the difference of belief and faith. “Belief is a truth held in the mind. Faith is a fire held in the heart.”

Belief is a truth held in the mind. Faith is a fire held in the heart. Because our hearts are so on fire with love for God and thanksgiving for Jesus we cannot help but go out and respond to the needs of God's people. Because our hearts burn within us as a community based on love, we cannot help but try to live in God's reality, which is very different from the world's reality.

God's reality doesn't allow us to separate our faith and our life. We cannot say that what happens in the boardroom doesn't matter to what

² Feasting on the Word: Year B, vol. 4, 2009. Bartlett and Brown eds. P. 17

happens in our bedroom. We cannot say that what we do privately has no effect on what we do publicly.

God's reality doesn't allow us to separate our private lives from our public actions. One must reflect the other. If our faith is not reflected in our lives, then it is worthless. It may be even worse than worthless because when life and faith are not lived as integrated wholes others see this and say that Christians are hypocrites. To not live our faith and life as integrated as possible does damage not only to the body of Christ but to the cause of Christ as well.

James call is a call to accountability. James tells us that what we think, what we say, what we do, and why we do it all matter. What we think, what we say, what we do, and why we do it can make the difference literally between life and death, not just of the body, but also of the soul; not just of an individual but also of a community.

James wrote his letter to faith communities. It was read in community and experienced in community. And so James call to accountability is a call for communal accountability. This leads me to ask what I believe are very important questions.

How are we accountable to each other here at St. Matthew's?

How are we holding each other, and ourselves as a group accountable for living an integrated life of faith?

How are we living out and being accountable to the gospel call of moving our faith from a passive cognitive assent to a living, vibrant, responsive act of love?

In the next five weeks we will be hearing, and hopefully responding, to the entire Letter of James. I would like us to hold these questions in our hearts as we do so. It is in asking these questions and seeking the answers that we will come closer to living God's reality for us.

Amen.

