

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor John H. Brock

September 10, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146
James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

Grace and peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Probably one of the things that most of you don't know about me is that I like cars. All kinds of cars. One of my favorite times of the year is January when the car show is over at the Farm Show Complex and I can take a look at all the new models and some of the old models and see what kinds of fun things they have come out with. Of course going with a couple of boys is sometimes difficult because they want to go through things a little bit quicker than I want to, but that is OK. It might surprise you, after saying this, that I have never owned a brand new car. That is not to say that the Brocks have not owned a brand new car, but I have not owned a brand new car.

I have bought used cars and trucks, and until recently the last several vehicles that I have purchased have been CPOs - certified preowned. Which is a fancy way of saying that I bought a car from a dealership that was in pretty good condition, but I paid a lot of extra money for it. But one of my favorite cars so far has probably been the last car that I had, which was a 1999 Volvo Cross Country Wagon. I really liked that car. Yes, it had leather interior and heated seats, it had the CD player in it, it had power windows and power seats, and a rear window defogger, but the two things that I really liked best about that car was the power and fuel economy of its engine, and the fact that it was all-wheel drive. The reason that all-wheel drive was so important to me was that in order to get out of my driveway you have to go uphill. In the summer that is not so important, but with the car that we had when we moved into the house, if it snowed even like an inch, my car wouldn't go up the driveway. So at 6:30 in the morning, and I am all ready to come to church on a Sunday and I was out there shoveling, I was not a happy camper. So I really liked that all-wheel drive.

I do think that this sort of ties in with what James was talking about. As we heard a few minutes ago:

“Suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, another comes in who is poor and dressed in dirty clothes. If you give special attention and good seats to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, ‘Just stand over there, or go sit on the floor,’ well, doesn't this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives.” (James 2:2-4 NLT)

How does that tie in to a 1999 Volvo Cross Country Station Wagon? Beautiful car, looked really nice, emerald green, tan interior. I have to say though, that I have liked Volvos since my youth, and have just never bought one. I was a bit surprised when I came home and was reading through the pile of papers that the dealer sent with me and I came across the one that said, “Welcome to the World of Luxury Automobiles!” Maybe I am a little naive (apparently I *am* a little naive in that respect). I thought it was just a dorky looking car that was really safe. I didn't realize that it was a Luxury vehicle.

But after I had the car awhile, I realized that I am getting to know the guy behind the service desk on a first name basis. I figured out that in a 20-month time, I spent \$5,000 on maintenance and repairs, and that is not counting what the warranty covered. The car looked really nice, and when it ran it was great, but I was spending the equivalent of nearly a car payment each month, just to keep the doggone thing running. I got drawn to that car by dorky looks, and its safety features, not so much by how well it was going to keep running.

James said in vs. 9 that “if you favor some people over others you are committing a sin, you are breaking the law.” I am not equating favoring a car with sinning. You don’t favor one car over another as sinful, but what if we favor one person over another based solely on the way that they look? Is that a sin? If we make a big deal over a young couple that comes in with two or three kids, and greet them and make sure that they have a nice seat, know where the coffee is, and where the Sunday School program is, but the guy who came in looking a little like maybe he had slept in his clothes for maybe two or three weeks, and needed a really bad shave, walked with a bit of a limp and wouldn’t look you in the eye, and we say to him, “Our washroom is right down the hall,” Is that a sin? Sin is kind of funny. What is sin?

I think sin is different for each of us. Sin is whatever gets in and messes up my relationship with God. Sin is that stuff that gets in and messes things up with our relationship with our spouse or significant other. Messes things up with the relationship we have with our teacher, our boss, our friends, or our neighbors. One of the messiest things about sin is that it is different for each of us. But sin is the same, too, because it messes up our relationship. Vs. 11-12. “For the same God who said you must not commit adultery also said you must not murder. So if you murder some one and do not commit adultery you have still broken the law. Whatever you do, and whatever you say, remember you will be judged by the law that sets you free.” What does it mean? Very simply, Sin is not quantitative. One sin is not better or worse than another one. There are no little sins, there are no little sins. Sin is sin, is sin, is sin.

(OK, maybe for men there might be one exception. If a woman ever comes up to you, be it your spouse, your daughter, the lady next store, a woman you never knew, and says, “Does this make me look fat?” there is only one answer to that and it is not a sin.) But, sin gets in there. Sin gets into our lives. Sin is that little insidious voice that we hear, in the back of our heads. “Oh, you really aren’t good enough to go out and be a witness of your faith.” Sin is what says, “Oh, I am really not good enough to ask my co-worker to come join us at worship today.” Sin is what we hear when we see somebody in need and say, “Oh man, that is really too bad. See you!”

What good is it, James says, if you have faith, but don’t have works? (V. 14) If we see a fruit tree and there is a sign in front of the fruit tree that says “Apples” and we look up and see oranges, do we believe the sign? Or do we believe what is hanging off of the branches? If somebody says “I’m a Christian” and than is incredibly mean to their co-workers; if somebody says “I’m a believer in Christ” and than is unfaithful to their spouse; if someone says “I follow Jesus,” and then makes fun of the folks walking around in Harrisburg on Derry St., which do we believe? What they are saying, or what they are doing? “If a brother or sister is naked, and lacks food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm, and eat your fill,’ and does not supply their bodily needs, what good is that. So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead.” (2:15-17)

We have a wonderful example of that this morning with little Hannah. She has been baptized into this faith. Not because of anything she has done, not because of anything Mom and Dad have done: she has been baptized into this faith because of what Christ has done for her. No matter what a wonderful, fine woman she will grow into being, there is nothing she can ever do to earn God's love. The incredible news for Hannah is that she doesn't have to. None of us have to earn God's love because it has been given to us. Just because we have that wonderful gift of grace and God's love, doesn't mean that it is OK to sit on our hind end, and never do anything.

I'm going to get back to vehicles. Sitting in my garage (sitting down in my second garage), is a 1960 Ford F100 pickup. For those of you who know about trucks, it is a short bed, style side, Inline six, three on the tree. If you don't know what any of that means - that's OK! Right now, that truck, as it has been for more than five years, is sitting in pieces. Someday when I have an extra five grand that I don't know what to do with, I'll get it up and running. As a matter of fact, one of our members, Larry Stauffer, has offered to teach me how to weld, so I can get my truck together. When I do get it running - and I mean just get it street legal, not MTV pimped out, not tricked or cherried out, not even "Overhauled," but I mean just get it street legal, will it matter to you that your pastor is driving around in a 46 yr. old beat-up pickup truck instead of a 1999 Volvo Cross Country Wagon?

Will it matter to me that I am driving around in a beat-up old pickup truck? Which is more important for you, or for me? The vehicle that I drive or the ministry that I can accomplish. Driving that old truck to hospitals to see those who are ill, homes to see those who can't get out, to bring communion to those who are no longer able to come here. Which is more important? What I drive, what I say, or what I do?

Amen.