

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

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

Let's see if y'all are a little more awake than they were at 8:15. We've got audience participation here! Okay, who here is a Christian? Good – I'm seeing hands (this is better than at the first service). Okay, who here is doing their best to live out a faith-filled life? Okay, who here thinks, maybe, they could be doing better? Alright. Now for this next one, I don't want anybody to raise their hand (even if it applies) – Who here has maybe, sometimes, been fed up with this whole Christian lifestyle and has just wanted to do the Sunday morning stuff, or maybe quit doing that altogether and throw the whole Christian thing out the window and say 'okay God, I believe in you, but I can handle things on my own, I don't need to be with all those hypocrites at church, so just get off my back and leave me alone'? (That's why I didn't want you to raise your hands!)

The Christian life is not necessarily always easy. Nor is it something that we necessarily, automatically, enjoy. There have been people throughout time who have tried to tell us "this is how a Christian ought to live" (that's what the Inquisition was all about). Or maybe you've heard some of the tele-evangelists who say "all Christians have to believe thus and so . . ."

Maybe that's why this letter of James makes us so nervous. We Christians who worship in the Lutheran tradition look at this letter of James and tend to think of this letter as being filled with "do's" and "don'ts", "ought's" and "should's". In fact, Luther wanted to throw the whole letter out of the Cannon altogether.

James was the brother of Jesus, and he wrote this letter at a time in his own life when he had been living a faith-filled lifestyle for several decades. He was writing not to one specific congregation, not to a geographic area, not even to a group of congregations; he was writing to the entire Church. We didn't hear it in our lesson this morning, but the letter starts out, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings." He's writing to everybody, all those who proclaim Christ.

James spends the next several verses talking about faith and wisdom, then he picks up on the theme of poverty and riches for a couple of verses, and then he touches on trial and temptation, which is where we picked up in our reading this morning. But back in verse 14, a little before we started, James writes, "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then when that desire has been conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin when fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my

beloved.” It almost sounds as though he was listening to those words Jesus spoke in this morning gospel lesson: “It’s not what goes in, but what comes out”.

Then James goes on with his description of how believers live. He compares and contrasts – “You must understand this, my beloved” . . . and here I need to stop. It doesn’t quite come across so strongly in the English as it does in the Greek, “you must understand this” – it’s a command, an imperative, it’s **“know this”** – “Beloved, **know this**, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger”. In other words, you’ve got two ears but one mouth for a reason! James continues, “Your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls”.

It is in the next part (verse 22), I think, that people begin to take exception with James: “But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” Does that mean we have to do something? Is that what James is saying? Well, maybe. If you think that you have to “earn” your salvation. That might be what James is saying, if you think that you can do something in order to be saved; if you believe in works righteousness.

But do you remember those wonderful verses that Martin Luther came across in Romans and Ephesians? We are saved by . . . not our works. We are saved by . . . not the things that we do. We are saved by . . . grace, through faith. We saw it happen a few minutes ago when little Maren Reese was baptized; she has been saved, not by anything that she has done (because right now all that she’s doing is eating, sleeping and pooping, and that doesn’t lead to salvation; those are fine things to do, but they don’t lead to salvation). We are saved by grace. Her parents and godparents took those promises on her behalf, that she will grow in love and that grace, not by anything that they can do for her or anything that she will do. So no, James isn’t talking about works righteousness, what he is very simply saying is “Are you a believer? Good. Then live like one.”

Yesterday morning on National Public Radio, I heard a story about a twelve-year-old girl who lives outside of Portland, Oregon. Her name is Tacey Smith. Tacey has been working for the last year and a half to raise money for the civilians who have been displaced by the war in Sudan’s troubled Darfur region. She has been doing this because she saw the movie Hotel Rwanda and was moved by a scene in the movie in which a TV reporter had just filmed some of the horrific slaughter, and then a heartbroken voice says, “If people see this video, they’ll say, ‘That’s horrible’, and then go on eating their dinner”. Tacey didn’t want to be one of those people who simply turn back to their dinner. And so with the help of some friends, she has started the Sudan Fair. With the help of her family, she has been selling the eggs that the family chickens produce and in a year and a half, she alone, has raised over \$2,000, and she has given it to the American Jewish World Service for their work in Rwanda. New York Times reporter Nicholas Christoph called her a “hero”. She wasn’t required to do this for some

social studies project at school. Her parents didn't make her do this. She saw a need, she acted on her belief, and she did something.

How many of us – or perhaps I should say how often have I – as James says in verse 23, “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.” Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.

Okay. So Friday I was at a store and I noticed that the very polite and helpful clerk behind the counter was wearing an Ankh. (If you're not up on your Egyptian mythology, an Ankh looks kind of like a cross, but it's more like a “t” and it has an oval at the top of it.) An Ankh is the symbol of the Egyptian god Ra; Ra was the god of fertility, and in Egyptian times, to wear an Ankh meant that you were a follower of Ra, you were a worshiper of Ra, you prayed to Ra, and you took part in orgies in order to celebrate the planting and the harvest each year. I wanted to ask this woman if she realized what it meant to wear an Ankh, to be a follower of Ra.

How many of us wear a cross more as a decoration than as any proclamation of our faith? If you've ever seen my car, you might have noticed a very distinct absence of a fish symbol, or a “honk if you love Jesus” bumper sticker, or of a “pastor” sticker, and the reason that those are not on my car is because, I know how I drive! I don't want someone to look at me and say, “That guy's a Christian?” “That guy's a pastor? I don't want to go to his church!” Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.

Brennan Manning is a former U.S. Marine who is now ordained in the Franciscan order. He once wrote, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle.”

I don't know anything more about Tacey Smith than what I heard on NPR yesterday; I don't know if she's a Christian or of Jewish heritage or if she's of any particular belief, but I do know that she is “doing”.

James calls to each and every one of us, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” And so I say to us all, go and do.

Amen.

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