



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 17, AUGUST 29, 2021
SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13; PSALM 45:1-2; JAMES 1:17-27; MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

James 1:17-27 *[Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for 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. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 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. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.]*

Today we begin a five-week jaunt through the book of James. It rarely makes anyone's list of favorite books of scripture, and it took three centuries of vigorous debate before the early Church decided to include it in the biblical canon. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther found the Book of James so theologically corrosive that he argued we would be better off throwing it on the scrap heap. He called it an "epistle of straw," and other epithets not suitable for this sermon.

But here we are centuries later, still reading the Book of James. I think there is good reason to find it problematic, and even better reason to keep reading it, and I hope I've piqued your interest sufficiently with this preamble to hang with me, and with this enigmatic book of James, and see what gleanings there might be for us.

First, it's not really a book; it's not even really a letter or epistle, in the same way that Paul wrote letters to church communities across

the empire. James is more a rambling blog of ethical wisdom and exhortations to readers to behave a certain way because of who you are. “Be doers of the word, not merely hearers,” we hear this morning as part of an opening volley that says that what you do matters. It is analogous to the famous quote from St. Francis: Proclaim the gospel at all times, use words when necessary.

James will go on to address what being doers of the word looks like, and why it is important. He says the human tongue is a small organ with a huge capacity to do good or evil. It reminds me of that ditty:

Sticks and stones can break my bones

But words can never hurt me.

That is an insidious lie. Words can and do hurt, and James says be mindful of the power of the tongue.

And then he speaks of suffering, and the very real human experience that suffering is. There are universal ethical themes to be gleaned, but they are imbedded within a particularity. He was writing to Palestinian Christians about thirty years after Jesus died, and on the eve of the Romans seizing and laying waste to Jerusalem and destroying the Temple in 70CE. Persecutions were real; civil unrest was on the rise; there were disagreements among the leaders of this new

Christian sect. The future was not at all clear. Suffering was one’s daily companion among Christians. And James speaks into that fog as thick as pea soup to say: be doers of the word. And true religion is this: “care for the orphans and widows, and keep oneself unstained by the world.” That needs some unpacking too, but at this point, let’s note that it is not one or the other, but both—caring for those in need and embracing a way of life for oneself.

The phrase “care for orphan and widow” is an off-used and readily accessible biblical proxy for obedience to the law which paradoxically is the law of liberty because in abiding by it one finds spiritual freedom. Elsewhere James will use another familiar proxy: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Surely, we can see the wisdom in that!

But then there’s this second charge to keep oneself unstained by the world. This is not the outward action of caring for others, but the inward spiritual work that must be engaged to remain grounded, centered, oriented to what is important. It’s the spiritual contemplation--the prayer and practices that inform the action. Contemplation and action—two sides of the Christian identity card. One without the other makes no sense. Christians don’t have a corner on that. I’d say all true religions have some version of this

two-pronged expression of contemplation and action.

But speaking now as a Christian to Christians, let me say that we do not do the work of justice because the world needs us to or even to make the world a better place. Those are penultimate reasons—not bad, but not primary for us, and when that work becomes primary or detached from the contemplative side, we risk falling into the trap of a self-important form of idolatry that will stifle the gift of compassionate action we have to share.

No, as Christians, we do the work of justice because our inner life is oriented to a God who calls us into relationship grounded in the goodness with which we are seeded. We are beloved; we were created for Love. We were created to love. The contemplative practices of Christianity exist to help us recognize our true identity especially when the wiles of the world have blown us off course, and we become lost.

In that seminal story of Adam and Eve in the garden, when they have hidden themselves in fear or shame or they're just simply lost, God calls out to them, "Where are you?" Of course, this is the story of all humanity, of you

and me, because we all know those experiences of lostness, fear or shame.

In our traditional rendering of the genesis story, we often hear it as an angry God, but the Hebrew word translated as "where are you?" is *Ayekha*, which more accurately means "who are you" or "where do you stand in this world?"¹ It is an inquiry of inner truth and outward expression, all at once. *Ayekha* is analogous to the charge James delivers to us this morning.

My friends, I know the moral arc of our world seems, in the present time, to be flapping violently in all directions rather than bending decidedly toward justice. The litany of lament grows longer each day, and we struggle to make sense of the suffering in Afghanistan and in Haiti and in hospital ICUs. It's a lot. There are no easy solutions, and the moral fog is as thick now, as it was for those to whom James was writing twenty centuries ago.

In such difficult times, I am convinced that the inner work becomes even more important for us as we seek to ground ourselves in that beloved identity from which all good things flow, including our acts of good will in the world. Every generous act of giving comes from God, James says, and

¹ Wiesel, Elie. *And the Sea is Never Full: Memoirs, 1969*. New York: Random House, 1999.

trusting that, we become doers of the word, free to be who we were created to be, and do what we were created to do.

Taking the long view, I remain fervently hopeful that the arc of the moral universe does bend toward justice, and that God is in the midst of all this, and is eternally calling

Ayekha to each of us, not out of judgment, but as a yearning for us to live fully into that way of being in the world, and know ourselves for who we truly are.



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