

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

09/02/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

1Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], 2they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand:
15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are
what defile.”

21For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft,
murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All
these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Good Works

Good morning! Today’s sermon isn’t on the Gospel reading necessarily. Take a listen
again to the second reading from the book of James:

*“17Every 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. 18In
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.*

*19You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak,
slow to anger; 20for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 21Therefore 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.*

22But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25But 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.

26If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27Religion 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.”¹

That’s some good stuff, right? Well, it turns out that not everyone agreed. Martin Luther writes the following regarding the book of James:

“We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn’t amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ, except at the beginning. I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he thought, ‘Wait a moment! I’ll oppose them and urge works alone,’ this he did.”²

Now that quote comes from a book titled Table Talk. It’s basically a collection of quotes that Luther’s students and friends took of his lectures, and notably those given during his time spent in the local pub. So, who is to know the sobriety of either Luther OR the person taking the notes. But what we do know is this, Luther had a few problems with the book of James. He even went so far as to call for its removal from the canon, that is, the Bible. But the root of his dislike

¹ James 1:17-27 (NRSV)

²Lehmann, Helmut T., and Theodore G. Tappert. *Luther's Works: Table Talk*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967. pp. 424

for the book stems from what I would call a misunderstanding of the works. For Martin Luther, and for most of the Lutheran church, works is a bad word. Works means us trying to work our way into heaven, and that just won't cut it in Luther's theology.

But here's where I break with the tradition, because I LOVE the book of James. It's a short, easy to read book that gives what I would say is practical advice on how to be a follower of Christ, and it does it all with some beautiful words. I mean, we just don't use the word "beloved" enough anymore! Listen to verse 19 again: *"You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."*³ It's always used in this intimate way that just reminds me of the type of community we are trying to create. When we call one another beloved, it comes from our hearts, the words used are never meant to cause pain or hurt, but instead they are used to urge us towards a deeper more powerful understanding of relationship with God and with one another.

The words used today are a perfect reminder and measuring stick for St. Paul's. As we welcome new members today, they help to keep us in check, tangible ways for us to live together. Dr. P.J. Hartin writes that in these verses the writer of James is developing a theology that is characterized by two aspects: *"(1) Human action is rooted in the moral standards God sets. (2) By God's action... the... hearers/readers have been brought into that community through 'the word of truth' and 'the implanted word.'* However, (and if I may be so bold, this is where Luther misunderstood the book of James) *they are called to respond. They work out their*

³James 1:19

response as part of a community that embraces the same standards and values... God's action and human action come together."⁴

"*Become doers of the word,*"⁵ that's what this piece of scripture tells me. It's easy to say anything with our lips, but as the old expression goes, we "gotta be able to walk the walk, not just talk the talk." And that's something Christianity has been accused of having in very short supply lately. It goes even deeper, it's that some of our "talk" isn't even good. Everyone likes to make fun of the millennial generation to which I belong, but one of the characteristics of that generation is that we're incredibly good at sensing the truth of someone's words or actions. We're also more concerned with what a group or organization is doing, to use another phrase, "do you put your money where your mouth is?" We want transparency and authenticity, and we can smell any deviation from a mile away.

All of which fits well with what I think the text is calling us to live out. But where do we start? Well, we read the book of James, we keep coming together to break bread, we live out God's call in our lives, striving for the words from today's text: "*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.*"⁶ Sounds like those are words we can live by. Amen.

⁴Hartin, P. J., and Daniel J. Harrington. *James*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003. pp. 107.

⁵ James 1:22a

⁶ James 1:19