

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

78th Week of Pandemic - Indoor Service

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

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

08/29/2021

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

<sup>1</sup>Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], <sup>2</sup>they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and 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.) <sup>5</sup>So 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?” <sup>6</sup>He 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; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ <sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” <sup>14</sup>Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” <sup>21</sup>For 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.

### **James**

Good morning! “*1James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*”<sup>1</sup> So begins the unassuming little book in the Bible that Martin Luther detested. Don't believe me? Here's what he had to say about it: “*We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn't amount to much... O Mary, Mother of God!*”<sup>2</sup> Not really a resounding endorsement, is it? Which is strange, because James might be my favorite letter in all of the New Testament. So... what should you think about this short little book? Well, and I don't get to say this very much, but I think Martin Luther was wrong about this one.

James comes up near the end of the Bible, and it's right after Hebrews, and before a bunch of other letters that are very short in length. James is very short too. It's only five chapters long, you could honestly read it in about 20 minutes. But, man, in those few short chapters you read something that is incredible. The “James” that is the author was for a long time thought to be the James that was the brother of Jesus. This was the same James that we read about in Acts who was the leader of the church in

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:1 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Lehmann, Helmut T., and Theodore G. Tappert. *Luther's Works: Table Talk*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967. p. 424-425.

Jerusalem. But now, pretty much all scholars agree that the author of this James is a different one. The book was written sometime in the late first century, possibly even the early second. The letter has often been compared with a sermon, because it attempts to encourage and direct the church with its content. In the opening we notice that it is addressed to “twelve tribes in dispersion.” This was a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, even now growing as new believers were added to the community.

One of the main reasons that Luther didn’t like this book was because of a little Lutheran curse word called works. For Luther, this was any attempt on the part of a Christian to “earn” their way into heaven through actions. One of the main tenets of the protestant movement argued that this wasn’t possible. So when James talks about doing good “works,” Luther got angry. But what Luther failed to realize was that these works, or actions, on the part of the believer were not to earn our way in, but out of a position of thanks for what has already been given. We act out of a desire to show that we are thankful for what God has done and given to us. From here James writes that: *“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.”<sup>3</sup>*

The focus of the section falls on those opening three commands: quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. It’s interesting the emphasis that is placed on listening. It can be easy to jump to the “slow to anger” part, but by doing this we miss the fact that these three instructions are connected. Any anger we create could rightly be rooted in an inability to keep our mouths shut and listen. I have told this story before, but there was a gentleman who once just stopped talking because he realized that in conversation he had stopped LISTENING to the person and was instead focused on what he would say next. When we stop and actually listen to a person, we can begin to see things differently, or at least understand. When we fail to listen, we jump in with something to say. I will be the first one to admit that I can often open my mouth before my brain has even had a chance to think, and it’s gotten me into trouble before. But this goes even deeper. When we rush to speak, our words are often poorly worded, wrong, or hurtful. They can tear down, not build up.

Which can lead to that final stage, anger. Our anger does not lead to righteousness. This is important, because righteousness can be described as a characteristic of God. Did you know that the word we translate as righteousness could also be translated as justice? In the Greek, they are the same. I’m not saying that anger as an emotion is wrong. But I do think that a distinction can be made between whatever happens to be the cause of that

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<sup>3</sup> James 1:19-27 NRSV

anger. When we fail to listen, when we jump to insult or speak, our anger is wrongly motivated.

And it is from here that we arrive at the true heart of the section; becoming doers of the word. One scholar writes that it “... *is in fact a suitable summary of the whole letter. The present imperative ‘become’ reminds James’s hearers/readers that their lives involve a constant development and growth. As believers they must put their belief into action.*”<sup>4</sup> You can see why Luther got worried. But the key to understanding this is that word “doers.” It implies a sense of action, an action that is ongoing and never finished. Our calling is never finished, something more always can be done. And again, we do this as a response to the blessings that God has already bestowed upon us. You can see why the lectionary pairs this text with our Gospel lesson. We can say we’re Christian, we can go through some of the motions, but ultimately, it’s just fake. We need to “walk the walk,” not just “talk the talk,” as they say.

What I love about this letter is that it forces me to get up and actually do something. The church is great about talking about all the things that might need to be done, but we often drop the ball when it comes to doing them. James even goes one step further and gives us something concrete to do: “*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.*” Again and again God calls on us to care for those who are the most vulnerable. Deuteronomy 24:17-18 tells the Israelites that “*17You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. 18Remember that you were a slave*

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<sup>4</sup> Hartin, P. J., and Daniel J. Harrington. *James*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003. p. 107.

*in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.” One scholar writes that “James sees this moral will captured not in ritual observances but in an imitation of God’s fundamental option for the poor.”<sup>5</sup>*

At the end of the day, the process is never finished. And this process of becoming “doers” is never over either. The fancy theological word for it is called sanctification, and we won’t see its completion until after our deaths. But my friends, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t start. So, what do you say? Are you ready? Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 109.