

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalms 15

James 1:17-27

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

09/01/2024

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. 21"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.

Sanctification

Good morning! I had talked a lot of talk, and now it was time to back it up. Before me sat the scourge and dregs of the universe: a Crummitt and Son shop truck. Like any company vehicle, it did not get the same sort of love that people tend to show to vehicles they own. Because I had said I could make it look better, the job had fallen on me. But this was no ordinary clean up job. The truck had been acquired when my family business bought out a local competitor. All over the white paint of this truck were TINY little specks of blue. The truck had not come from the factory with these, they were unfortunate additions. Apparently the previous owner had painted a trailer blue in the middle of a building with this truck parked nearby. All of the overspray went into the air and settled on my current patient.

While speaking up may have been my first mistake, I soon made my second one. My goal was to work fast, and so I began my first attempt at wet sanding. This went about as well as you probably expected, as I very quickly sanded through the overspray and through the clear coat and color to the primer below. In the grand scheme of things, if you're going to mess up, this truck was the one to do it on. But it became a reminder and lesson that like most things, getting better was something that would take time.

Action is a major theme in our second reading from the book of James. I preach on it whenever I get the chance, it's one of my favorite books in all of the Bible. Martin Luther, on the other hand, was not a fan of James. Listen to what he had to say: "*We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn't amount to much... I maintain that [someone] wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any.*"¹

But the reason for his hatred was, I think, misplaced. Luther was, and I don't get to say this often, misunderstanding the book. One of the rallying calls of the Reformation, the movement that saw the formation of Protestant churches, was the strong belief that God saves us not because of anything we do on our part, but simply because salvation is the sort of thing God likes doing. We are justified not by works, but by faith. This understanding meant that Luther and other reformers were acutely aware of anything that seemed to remotely suggest we could work or earn our way into heaven. So, even though the Epistle of James had been popular in the early church, reformers looked at the very strong action language in James and quickly responded with a "no."

But what they had missed was that James was the answer to a question they weren't asking yet. Christians in the early church had looked around, knowing the reality that God had saved them, and asked "Well... what do we do now?" We'll be spending time off and on over the next few weeks seeing how the writer of the book of James answered that question, but today will be an introduction and brief discussion about the assigned text for today.

¹ Lehmann, Helmut T., and Theodore G. Tappert. *Luther's Works: Table Talk*. Vol. 54. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967. p. 424.

Like a lot of the letters in the Second Testament, the writer is familiar with the audience and only identifies themselves in a way that makes it hard for us to piece things together 2,000 years later. In this book it's simply "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*"² The intended audience is named as "*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*"³ which seems to indicate that the author and audience are from strong Jewish descent. In fact, the book as a whole shares a lot of similarities with a genre of writing called wisdom literature. You can read similar passages in books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. One of the things I appreciate about this type of writing is that it focuses on common sense practical advice, something that can often feel missing in other biblical passages.

Traditionally, the book's authorship has been attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. Now, more recent scholarship has called this into question, but for a long time the book was attributed to James, sometimes called "James the Just." He is often considered the first bishop of Jerusalem, and we hear references to him in the Gospels in Acts, as well as some of Paul's writings.⁴ If it IS written by Jesus' brother, that puts the date of its writing sometime in the late 50's or very early 60's.⁵ One of the things that clouds the issue is that the "letter" doesn't seem to follow any of the normal patterns we see in other books, like those written by Paul. It only has a simple greeting and makes no reference to people that the writer knows. It also lacks the traditional goodbye we see elsewhere. Because of

² James 1:1a NRSV

³ James 1:1b NRSV

⁴ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. p. 462.

⁵ Hartin, P. J., and Daniel J. Harrington. *James*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003. p. 25.

this, as well as the general content of the letter, scholars have creatively categorized it as one of the “General Epistles.”⁶

But today we will only touch on the beginning of the book. One of the things that I love about James is the deeply personal way it seems to speak to the community. “*You must understand this, my beloved*”⁷ the writer asks. They speak out of and from a place of love. This isn’t an angry overseer berating a charge they dislike. This is a person deeply passionate about the people and their lives together.

Which brings us to what some scholars call the theme of the whole book of James. In verse 22 the writer asks that the community “*be doers of the word, not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*” We can talk all the talk in the whole world, but if we don’t DO something about our faith, if we don’t DO something to help those around us that we see suffering... What's the point? We’re, as the writer would say, lying to ourselves. The Christian faith is absolutely about just that, faith. But it’s also about putting that faith into concrete action. Now, the action we take can take on a variety of forms depending on what we’re actually able to do, but what remains important is that we see this action as an outward expression of the love that God has shown us. A love that changed the world, that changed us, and that always does marvelous and amazing things. So my beloved, what do you think? Amen.

⁶ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. p. 465.

⁷ James 1:19a NRSV