

Weekend of Sunday, August 29, 2021
14th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 22/Proper 17/Year B

First Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Second Reading: James 1:17-27

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

Sermon Title: “James – Brother of Jesus, Apostle of Christ – Part 1”

Theme

The letter of James was intended to provide first-century Christians with instruction in godly behavior. Here Christians are encouraged to listen carefully and to act on what they hear, especially by caring for those least able to care for themselves.

Text – James 1:17-27

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.

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

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.”

Introduction

The story of James, the author of the Letter of James, has fascinated me for a long time. Imagine being the half-brother to Jesus Christ!

Well, we have been presented with an opportunity to explore him, and his relationship with his big brother, and his ministry. For this and the next five weeks, the Epistle Readings are from the Letter of James. Now the editors of the lectionary have left a few passages out so I will cover them in the Daily Word, my online devotional. If you don't get the Daily Word, you may want to subscribe. And if you don't have access to the internet, I have print copies available at the Welcome Center. That way we will be able to cover the entire letter, which by the way, is only five chapters long.

As has been my pattern with sermon series, I will begin each week with some discovery into some issues about James, but then get into the actual passage from the Letter of James prescribed for the week.

Issue One: Which James are We Talking About?

The first issue we have to contend with is that there are four men named James mentioned in the New Testament:

James, the son of Alphaeus; a disciple of Jesus; aka "James the Less"

(Acts 1:13) When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

James, the father of the disciple Judas (not Judas Iscariot)

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James the son of Zebedee; a disciple of Jesus and brother of the apostle John; aka "James the Greater"

(Mathew 10:2) These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;

James, the brother of Jesus; aka "James the Just" and "James of Jerusalem"

(Mark 6:3) Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

(Galatians 1:19) I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother.

It is this last James, that is identified as the brother of Jesus, or as the apostle Paul wrote in Galatians, "James the Lord's brother." This is important because Paul was a contemporary of the First Century disciples and apostles and by the time of Paul's ministry, James the brother of Jesus had become an early leader of the Jerusalem church. After Peter departed from Jerusalem because Herod Agrippa was trying to have him killed, James became the presider of the Council of Jerusalem, and by some ancient writings, James was named the bishop of Jerusalem and presided over the church of Jerusalem for thirty years.

Now, imagine being Paul, who never met Jesus in the flesh, but only through supernatural means. Then he met James the brother of Jesus Christ. Don't you imagine in the breakout sessions of the Jerusalem Council Paul asked, "What was your brother like?" "How tall was he?" "Was he handsome?" "Did he look like you?" "When did you begin to see him differently?" Notice in the earlier illustrations that James, the brother of Jesus, was not a disciple. But I am getting ahead of myself.

As interesting as figuring out which James is the author of the Letter of James and the brother of Jesus, is the issue of *if and how* James is the brother of Jesus – and this is where the story gets controversial.

No matter what you believe in what I am about to tell you, we must start with the fact that at the very least, James is the *half-brother* of Jesus. This is logical because Jesus' father is God, his Heavenly Father. That is the extent of the easy information to understand.

If one follows the doctrine of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, then one believes in the perpetual virginity of Mary which teaches that Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Therefore the children listed in Mark 6, including James, could not have been her biological children but perhaps were step-brothers from a previous undisclosed marriage of Joseph, or possibly cousins of Jesus. How could this be you ask? In 553 AD the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople decreed that Mary was:

Aeiparthenos (Greek ἀειπάρθενος "ever-virgin").

If one does not follow that doctrine like I don't, then after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had normal marital relations as is insinuated in Matthew 1:

Matthew 1:24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but ***had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son***; and he named him Jesus.

Then we can flip in our Bibles to Mark 6 where the evangelist wrote of Jesus' unwelcome homecoming at which his townsfolk asked indignantly:

Mark 6:3 "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of ***James***, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"

So in my mind, Mary was the preeminent human component and vessel through which God conceived God's Messiah, and who with her husband Joseph, gave him the best human upbringing a Jewish peasant boy could have. But I believe and scripture leads me to conclude that Joseph and Mary were *really* married and experienced the fullness of a First Century Jewish family, including bearing other children including ***James***, Joseph, Judas, Simon, and some unnamed sisters.

Well, that is enough exploration for this week, let's get into the text that we have for today.

Sermon

Sadly, we begin at verse seventeen, missing the first sixteen verses. But that is no big deal. Just look back at the last few days of The Daily Word, or pick up my notes at the Welcome Center, or go home and read it yourselves from your Bibles.

As we will see throughout this and the next four weeks, the Letter of James is clear and forceful in its moral exhortations. Indeed, Martin Luther, who was a fan of the Apostle Paul's writing, argued that James and Paul were at odds. We Lutherans can quote the essence of Galatians 2:16 by heart:

¹⁶yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that *we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works* of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

It would appear that James had the direct opposite opinion when he taught that:

^{2:24}You see that *a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

It does seem that these are two opposed positions. We can see why Luther would have been in favor of excising the Letter of James from the canon of scripture. But modern scholarship has come to the position that James and Paul do not contradict themselves at all, but more on that the weekend of September 26.

Nevertheless, it is the position of James, that if one is a person of faith, then there should be evidence of that faith. And this passage is true to form. James taught first that God is the "Father of lights." And he further describes God as being without ¹⁷"variation or shadow due to change." This is James attempting to identify God with light instead of darkness; complete and generous goodness instead of any malice; with stability and consistency rather than being temperamental or petulant.

Do you remember me describing how the pagan culture of Ephesus and the greater Roman world worshiped their pagan gods to manipulate them because they, the pagan gods, may or may not be good or consistent in dealing with mortals? Well, the "Father of lights" that James worshiped is just about as opposite of the pagan gods as could be.

Furthermore, this "Father of lights" is our creator giving birth to us for a purpose, and that purpose is to become "a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." That means that God created us to be produce and to produce. And what are we God's produce, supposed to produce? That which is itself, characteristic of God, God's self:

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.

James wrote that the Christian should "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." Well this is just good advice for human relations, isn't it? Imagine how the world would change if all human beings did this one thing.

But there is a higher, more important reason: James wrote that "anger does not produce God's righteousness." In other words, bad behavior disappoints God, and when we behave in a godly manner we are more likely to embody righteousness that is similar to God's righteousness. It is impossible to produce God's righteousness entirely, but behaving in a godly manner will please God and is certainly closer to God's righteousness.

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.

Again, just great instruction from James. To "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" is, as we say, *to walk the talk*; it means that once we know better, that we *actually do* do better. To be a Christian and member *of this church is* to have been instructed, and to be committed to doing better.

Do you do everything I tell you to do? No! Do I do everything I tell myself to do? No! But agree with me that because we know better, we try to do better. And I think our efforts to do better actually do please God.

Now some behaviors are just blatantly wrong and must be stopped immediately, but most of us have some behaviors that are not as egregious that we try to make incremental progress against on a daily basis. For example, since taking the call to Zion, I have not been able to be regular in an exercise routine. I have some late nights, and some early mornings and I use these as excuses to sleep in. I know better. A well-rested and healthy pastor is a good thing for you and me, but I don't always take the best care of myself.

In the Gospel Reading from Mark, Jesus had some explaining to do for the bad behavior of his disciples. They ate with unwashed hands! Imagine! Well, yes! There is a rule against that and Jesus and his disciples knew it. But as Jesus pointed out, these are not the concerns of God.

Now when it comes to our spiritual lives, this being "doers of the word, and not merely hearers" is even more important. Do you realize that whatever we say or do is a reflection of the God we worship and serve? And that goes for what we say and do and think when no one is watching. It's true, read on with me:

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.

James took the position that our "religion," our spirituality, our Christian lives, will not be measured by our Sunday piety, but by our Monday through Saturday routines. We cannot show up on God's Work Our Hands Day of Service and feel good about our selfish selves the other 364 days of the year. It doesn't work like that, wrote James.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today we have been exhorted to live lives worthy of our calling. Not just when we are at church on Sunday, but every moment of every day. Let our "religion" be the living out of our lives of discipleship, trying always to live up to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing we will never achieve it, but pleasing God with our efforts.

Prayer

O God our strength, left to ourselves we are sinful human beings unable to attain godliness and righteousness. But by the sacrifice of your Son and our Lord, we are given grace upon grace; we are forgiven and freed to live lives unencumbered by guilt. Continue to send us your Holy Spirit to guide us in holy and godly living so that at the end of the age, we may obtain righteousness won for us by Jesus Christ our Lord. It is in his name we pray. Amen