

Fourteenth Sunday After Whitsunday

Song of Songs 2:8-13

James 1:17-27

Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9

Illuminate all ministers of the Gospel with true knowledge, and understanding of thy word; and that both by their preaching and living they may set it forth, and show it accordingly. - Great Litany

The Epistle of James. The Letter of James. James might be the most contentious book in our canon—our Bible. James arrived late on the scene of compilation. Written sometime in the 1st or 2nd centuries, while Christianity was still in its infancy, James wasn't really accepted as scripture until the late 3rd century. The author is wildly unknown. Theories abound, but none can quite hold water. The author simply identifies themselves as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther famously referred the Letter of James as “the epistle of straw” because he felt there was nothing of gospel importance in it. The letter is admittedly short on Jesus—he doesn't receive a starring role; especially in comparison to other letters in the New Testament. But James is rich with the practical and tangible.

The letter of James, unlike most of the letters in the Bible, was not written to a specific community to tackle a specific problem. It was written to what the author called "the twelve tribes in Diaspora," or, as some have interpreted that phrase, the entire Christian church as it began to spread out over the world.

The letter's audience scholars believe were people entirely aware of Jesus and the Jesus story. The letter was written, not to bring people **to** faith, rather it was written to advise its readers on how to live out the faith they already had.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.

A few weeks ago I sat with some friends at dinner and conversation flowed. You know these dinners—these conversations. We chatted about our jobs and our latest vacations, art exhibitions we have viewed and concerts we had heard. We argued about politics and olympics. We—as good yankees do—complained about the the snow of last winter, the rain of the spring, the heat of the summer.

And as I am sure you have also experienced—we began to talk about something that happened in the world that week. I can't recall what specific event was referenced, but before we knew it we had discussed what felt like every ill that plagues the world.

We talked about student loans and their crippling effect. We talked about (I'm sure) another mass shooting and the new normal that gun violence has become. We talked about rising sea levels and the warming planet. We talked about growing income inequality, and pay differences between women and men. We talked about those in Boston who are without home and hungry. That could have been it, but of course that wasn't it.

We also talked about friends who were struggling in their marriage. We talked about cancer and those whom we knew who lived with it or were dying from it. We talked about those we knew who struggled with depression and heart ache. We talked about the decline or at least what feels like a decline, of Christianity—and the possibility that those around the table (mostly clergy) may lose our jobs and churches struggle and close.

You know these conversations. I know you do. We have them. They are overwhelming. Life, this world, its problems, overwhelming.

After we exhausted ourselves with our laundry lists of problems of the world, we sat in silence for a moment—none of us quite knowing what to say—each of us wondering how do we fix, how do we solve, how do we heal.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers, James says. The ultimate social justice, good works above all, command in the New Testament. The instruction to listen to the Law of God, then go out into the world and *do* it—put it into action—live it.

Well, I'm sorry James—but that seems like a task that I am not quite ready to take on. If the laundry list of ills in this world isn't enough to overwhelm me, the task of going out in the world to “do” will. And to be honest, just like my conversation with my friends, I don't know what direction to go in first, James.

It is unclear to most scholars what the Word is that James is referencing when he writes “be doers of the word”. Some scholars claim that the Word is the Torah, the prophets and Hebrew writings and that James is instructing his audience to follow the teachings and laws found in Genesis and Exodus, Isaiah and the others. Hearing their lessons, then embodying them.

Other scholars claim that the Word that James is referencing is Jesus. His teachings and life stories, and James is instructing his audience to follow in the footsteps of the Gospel. To hear about the morals of Jesus, then embody them.

To me, whether James is referencing the Jewish Law or Jesus, doesn't quite solve the issue. The stakes are equally high. To be a doer of either is an overwhelming challenge, fraught with so much weight and complicated by so many directions.

Those to whom James was writing, they lived in an equally overwhelming time. Nations warring, governments falling and rising, class systems and economic inequality. And I bet, upon receiving this letter, or hearing its instruction, they too said “Well, I'm sorry James.” It isn't that simple, James.

In preparation for this week's sermon, I wanted to know what the implications of being a doer of the Word could mean. And in both cases—Jewish Law and Jesus teachings—I was overwhelmed by the weight of James' instruction. So, I searched the Bible.

I found myself making a list; like a Saturday chore list or a Great Litany: And here's what I found in just a quick scan of the Bible, what being a "doer" could mean:

Care for creation, our environment.

Love God.

Don't lie.

Don't kill.

Honor your parents.

Honor the sabbath.

Welcome the stranger.

Feed the hungry.

Clothe the naked.

Visit the imprisoned.

Give your possessions to the poor.

Show hospitality

Live in community.

Wash feet.

Act Justly. Love Mercy.

Support orphans and widows.

Ask for forgiveness.

Forgive your oppressor.

Pray for and love you enemy.

Feed your enemy.

Take up a cross. Trust God. Follow God.

"Well, I'm sorry James." This whole being a doer of the word is easier said than done.

Perhaps that is my struggle with James, with James and his instruction. The Word, the Law of God, be it the teachings of Jesus or the teachings of the hebrew scriptures requires so very much—it pulls us in a so many directions and asks us to go down paths that are uncomfortable, worrisome, and sometimes dangerous.

James instructs us to be doers and not *merely* hearers. In the chapters before and after our reading this morning, James stresses the importance of hearing the Law of God—that we listen before act. When I fail to listen intently, I become overwhelmed by all that my faith requires. But when I do listen, when I pause in my frantic list making, I begin to understand.

Here's the lesson of the whole Bible: Of the Law of God—be it the Torah, the prophets, the Gospels or the letters: Love. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Each action required of us, each step in being a doer of the Word is grounded in this core message of God: Love. Love one another. Love God. It's not about following a recipe, or checking actions off a list. It's about acting with love, living with love.

That's where we start, that's the direction we orient ourselves. The love of God, the love of one another—it challenges and comforts. That's where we begin in our doing. It may not take away the full weight of the ills of this world, but it does ignite within us a hope and a courage to face it all.

And that's what James was trying to say all along—listen to the Law of God, love, and go do it. Go love.

Well, James, it's start and it's worth to try.

Thanks be to God. Amen.