

“The Faith We Live”

James 1:17-27

First Presbyterian Church, Durham

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Proper 17, Year B

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(Thanks to Rev. Robert Dunham for his story from The Democratic Republic of Congo and for pointing me to the TED Talk quote from Pope Francis.)

Back in my seminary days, I never would have dreamed that someday I would be preaching a sermon on the book of James. After all, everyone knows that Reformed Christians don't hold this book in high regard, following the lead of the Reformer Martin Luther. We had all learned in our theology classes that Martin Luther called the book of James an “epistle of straw.” He argued that when consumed by fire, the book of James would burn like straw and leave no gold nugget of the gospel remaining. He threw James out of his “canon within a canon” for two primary reasons: To begin with, James practically ignores the reality of Jesus Christ, mentioning Jesus only two times in the whole book. James does not talk about the power of the cross as Jesus' act for redemption of sin. He does not refer to baptism at all and grace is not a word that he seems to have in his vocabulary. This was enough to make any good Reformed theologian squirm.

The second thing that caused Luther to reject this letter was James' emphasis on works. Luther's understanding of the gospel message and Paul's letters was that “By grace we are saved, through faith. This is not a result of our own actions, lest we should boast, but it is a gift from God.” James' focus on the importance of

a faithful person's actions rather than grace as God's gift in Christ made Luther completely dismiss the book of James.¹

So why, then, would a preacher in the Reformed Tradition choose to preach on such a text in a Reformed congregation? Perhaps because I believe that though the book of James doesn't come with the theological depth of Paul's letters, it still has much to say about what it means to live the Christian life. After all, even Paul argued that once people understood, even partially, the power of the gift of God's grace, then their lives would reflect their gratitude to God and they would exhibit the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control – in other words, works.

James begins this passage with an acknowledgement that any generous act of giving, with every perfect gift comes from God. God is the brightest light and the fullest truth and we are called to listen to God, to hear God's truth, and then to live the word we hear.

Bob Dunham, recently retired Pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, and my friend and colleague, tells the story of an experience he had in the Democratic Republic of Congo some years ago. While on his trip, he visited a

¹ Edward F. Markquart, "James, True Religion, and the Real Thing," Sermons from Seattle, http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_james_trus_religion_and_the_real_thing.htm (accessed 8-30-18).

village called Lubondai, where an old, abandoned Presbyterian mission station haunted the landscape. He writes:

It was once the thriving center of a missionary medical enterprise and home to a school for missionary children, but the mission station at Lubondai was abandoned decades ago when Good Shepherd Hospital was opened in Tshikaji, a hundred miles away. I visited Lubondai and the remnants of that mission station some years ago and thought the village resembled something out of an old David Lean film – lush and overgrown, a mysterious ruin, a remnant of a once vibrant village. Rows of tall royal palm trees still lined the old village common, but the old homes, hospital and school were in disarray.

In its prime, it surely was the quintessential Calvinist village: the school at one end, the hospital at the other and, right in the center of it all, the church. To some degree the church still functions, though it has lost much of its former vitality. When the missionaries left Lubondai all those years ago, they seemed to take with them much of the community's heart.

But the church still stands; it is open on three sides. The pews are still there... and the pulpit... and the chancel chairs, carved from African ebony,

etched with crosses. A brick arch on the chancel wall frames the pulpit, and within the arch there is an inscription, written in the language of the land, Tshiluba. I asked the village pastor, through our interpreter, what the inscription said. His smile seemed almost embarrassed. “What it says is not difficult to say,” he responded. “What is difficult, especially now, is to *do* what it says.” Then he sighed and said, “The words are from the letter of James in the Bible: ‘Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.’ I am afraid,” he said, “that we are mostly only hearers.”²

While I fear that this is true for many Christians – that they are ready and willing to hear, but not so ready and willing to do - I doubt that many in this congregation could be accused of being only hearers of the word. A big part of this church’s culture is about serving God in the world! This congregation is full of doers! You are volunteers in homeless shelters, food pantries, and job training non-profits. You care for you literal and metaphorical neighbors. You visit the sick, you give out blessing bags, you visit those in prison, you counsel those who are lonely or in need. In fact, in this church, the opposite of James’ exhortation might be true! We might be so busy doing that we forget to pause and listen. . . .

² Robert E. Dunham, “Doers,” A sermon preached at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, NC on May 7, 2017.

But then again, isn't that why we gather each Sunday in this place? To listen for what God might be telling us about how we are to live in the world? To remind ourselves of God's activity in our lives, of God's grace in our lives, and to be strengthened for the work ahead in our Monday-Saturday lives? When we gather for worship as the Body of Christ we are reminded who we are and whose we are. We are reminded that we are not alone in the quest to bring love into the world and to conquer hate, and we are equipped with the "tools" we need, the armor, as Marilyn reminded us about last week, so that we might enter into our daily lives prepared to bear witness to God's love wherever we go and whatever we do.

One of you recently told me that you didn't know how you would get through the week without worship on Sunday. You told me that the music, the hymns, the prayers, and the reflection on Scripture help you breathe again and get you ready to face the challenges of the week ahead. Like this member, we gather to hear the word, that we might go into the world and be doers of the word – doing justice, loving kindness, caring for the poor, the aging, the lonely, the homeless, the sick, the victims of injustice, and anyone in need of the light and hope and justice of Christ.

Tomorrow we celebrate Labor Day, a day officially established in 1894 to "honor the American Labor movement and the contributions that workers have

made to the strength, prosperity, laws and well-being of the country.”³ As Christians, we recognize the efforts for justice and equal rights in the labor movement. We know that God’s call for justice means that people should be paid a living wage for their real and significant labors. We remember Martin Luther King, Jr.’s joining with the Memphis sanitation workers 50 years ago after they went on strike to demand better pay and safer working conditions. We think of our own role in fighting for a living wage in our city, state, and country. Many of us marched in Raleigh for better pay for teachers and more support for our children and public education. Seeking justice in our weekly lives is just what we do after we hear God’s word read and proclaimed in worship each Sunday. We are equipped by the word to be doers of God’s justice in the world.

I want you to think of all the ways you were doers of the word this week. Remember the ways you were slow to anger and all the ways you were quick to listen and slow to speak. Think of the times you gave something of yourself to make another person’s life better – with a kind word, or a thoughtful gift, with a note of thanks, or a smile of gratitude, with a gift of time, or a message of hope, with a visit with a person who was sick or lonely, or a song with someone who was depressed. Remember the ways you volunteered your time and energy to do something that maybe no one else could do but you. And now, I want you to think

³ “Labor Day,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_Day (accessed 8-31-18).

of one place or space this week where God will use you to listen to friend, to encourage a stranger, to visit someone, or to be patient and kind to one you meet along the way. Think of the ways you will “labor” as a Christian in the world this week and the ways your love will bring light to the life of another, or maybe many others, along the way.

Last year, Pope Francis spoke at a TED Talk conference in Vancouver. Via video feed, he shared again the Parable of the Good Samaritan and offered it as a message of hope for those who often feel hopeless in the face of evil in the world. He said:

The story of the Good Samaritan is the story of today’s humanity. People’s paths are riddled with suffering, as everything is centered around money and things, instead of people. And often there is this habit, by people who call themselves “respectable,” of not taking care of the others, thus leaving behind thousands of human beings, or entire populations, on the side of the road. Fortunately, there are also those who are creating a new world by taking care of the other, even out of their own pockets. Mother Teresa ... said: “One cannot love, unless it is at their own expense.”

He continues by claiming the power of those who are “doers” of love in the world:

We have so much to do, and we must do it together. But how can we do that with all the evil [that surrounds us]? Thank God, no system can nullify our desire to open up to the good, to compassion and to our capacity to react against evil, all of which stem from deep within our hearts. Now you might tell me, “Sure, these are beautiful words, but I am not the Good Samaritan, nor Mother Teresa of Calcutta.” On the contrary: we are precious, each and every one of us. Each and every one of us is irreplaceable in the eyes of God. Through the darkness of today’s conflicts, each and every one of us can become a bright candle, a reminder that light will overcome darkness, and never the other way around.

To Christians, the future does have a name, and its name is Hope. Feeling hopeful does not mean to be optimistically naïve and ignore the tragedy humanity is facing. Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn’t lock itself into darkness, that doesn’t dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow. Hope is the door that opens onto the future.... And it can do so much, because a tiny flicker of light that feeds on hope is enough to shatter the shield of darkness. A single individual is enough for hope to exist, and that individual can be you. And then there will be another “you,” and another “you,” and it turns into an “us.” And so, does

hope begin when we have an “us?” No. Hope began with one “you.” When there is an “us,” there begins a revolution.⁴

So, go friends. Go join the revolution of labor and love. Be doers of the word. Be bearers of the light. Be builders of God’s Kingdom of grace and peace.

And may God be with us all.

In the name of our God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

⁴ His Holiness Pope Francis, TED2017, April 25, 2017, Vancouver, British Columbia, https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_francois_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en, accessed April 27, 2017. Thanks to Bob Dunham for pointing this TED Talk out to me.