

SEPTEMBER 9th

Rev. Francis Berghuis – Deacon

Epistle – James 2: 1-10 (11-13), 14-17

Let us pray. Help me to listen. O Holy One, I hear and say so many words yet, yours is the word I need. Speak now, and help me listen;

And, if what I hear, is silence, Let it quiet me, Let it disturb me, Let it touch my need, Let it break my pride, Let it shrink my certainties, Let it enlarge my wonder. Amen. (Ted Loder, Guerrillas of Grace)

This morning, I want to talk about the “Epistle reading”, from the Letter of James. Most likely, these letters were written by a student, or an admirer of James, which was the custom back then. Today it might be called “Fake News”. ☺

James – reportedly, the brother of our Lord – was the head of the Jerusalem Assembly in Palestine from 40 to 60 AD, and was known about town as “James the Just” OR “the Just One”. Now, one would think that being part of the family of Jesus, being the head of the Jerusalem Assembly for 20 years, and, being known for his fairness, his influence would have been great – instead, his influence became smaller and smaller, to the point of James being mostly an afterthought.

Today, however, following the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a greater understanding of his role in his dedication to “justness”, James is slowly making a comeback to Christians throughout the world.

And, even though we just heard the reading of the Epistle, I would like to read it to you again. Why? ... Because I believe it is one of the most important lessons that has survived ... and, it is one of those rare examples that can be a great help in understanding, and in confronting our struggles today.

The Letter of James: My brothers and sisters – do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For, if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and, if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and, if you take notice, of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please”, while, to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there”, or “Sit at my feet”. Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the “poor in the world” to be “rich in faith”, and to be “heirs to the Kingdom”, as he has promised to those who love him? But, you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who, blaspheme the excellent name, that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, ... “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But, if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted, by the law, as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point, has become accountable for all of it. So speak, and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy, to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment. [And] What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Can faith save you? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

So ... the snobbishness ... the contempt ... the discrimination written about in the Epistle, are all instances of “worldliness” – our worldly struggles.

And yes, as of late, there have been far too many examples, taking place among us in this world. The faith of our Lord is not compatible with such partiality. To discriminate among persons because of their social or financial status, or even what service they go to, is to pass judgments from unkind motives ... to become judges with evil thoughts. “Life, according to the Christian faith”, and, “life, according to worldly standards”, are in sharp contrast here.

The faith, which originates in Jesus Christ, disavows distinctions based upon birth, race, property, gender, or sexual orientation. Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.

During a daily meditation last week, Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk, stated: “We live in evil times my friends.” I believe he is right ... and, it is not unlike the times we learned about this morning in the Epistle.

But, in my opinion, there is a difference.

Back, during the “Epistle times”, evil was localized – today it is worldwide epidemic. “Fear of this, fear of that, fear of them different from me” – these have become the “political mantras of the powerful”, who have used their power to create fear and hate among those who follow them. This is why I believe that, what James was writing about back in the early Church – best described in one word as “justice” – be taken to heart in our churches today.

A long time ago – say about 20 years – I had a life changing dream. The dream took place here at All Saints. I was kneeling, waiting for the bread and cup. A dirty, smelly, disheveled figure approached me, with cup in hand. But instead of giving it to me, he bent down and whispered in my ear ... “follow Christ”. That message – to follow Christ – has been my life’s goal since, and it needs to be the message that we send out of All Saints. Evil can be taken down by good works grounded in love and grace ... but, we ALL must be a part of it. A good way to do that is – when you come into All Saints you bring in the dust of the world. During that time you are in worship, brush the dust off by opening you hearts to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to each other.

When you leave All Saints take that love with you, share it with others, striking down the epidemic of fear with the love of Jesus. The time is now – we are the people, with the grace of God, to go out - into the world - as Christians should! And it starts with faith ... with trust.

Through my many years I have been told that trust is “earned”. I disagree. When I meet someone, I trust them until they prove to me they cannot be trusted. Some say this is naïve. I say ... “if I’m supposed to see the face of Christ in each person I meet, how can I not trust them?”

Go in peace and do the work of the Lord.

Amen.