

James 1: 17-27 "Be Doers of the Word" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/29/21

A young woman was soaking up some California sun on the beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, carrying a towel, came up to her and asked her, "Do you believe in God?" She was surprised at the question and looked around for his parents. His mother was not far away nursing a newborn and it seemed the little boy didn't want to disturb her. She replied, "Why, yes, I believe in God." Then he asked her, "Do you go to church every Sunday?" Again, her answer was "Yes!" Then he asked, "Do you read your Bible and pray every day?" Again, she said "Yes!" But by now her curiosity was overwhelming. At last, the boy sighed and said with obvious relief, "Will you hold my dollar while I go in the water?" We are all looking for somebody to trust, someone whose actions match their words, no matter how old we are.

The author of James was a keen observer of human nature, and he paid close attention to the details of everyday life. He noticed the generous acts, the honest ones, the small gifts, the gestures and words we use. He knew that such small acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, holding together the scaffold on which we build community and the social order. James wanted readers to grasp the basics of Christian life and to be reminded that it is God who supplies all the good things in people's lives. The first verse of our scripture gives readers a strong connection between God's activity and human experience stating, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above." It is God who nurtures us, gives us gifts, and provides direction for our lives, often using human beings to do so. Disciples of Christ renowned preacher Fred Craddock once remarked if he had it all to do over again, he would have preached more about God. It has become all too common these days for preachers to avoid the subject of God but the first chapter of James doesn't allow such diversions. It seems

that one can never spend too much time pondering on the Divine Mystery we call God. A young theological student was once asked to describe his relationship with God but was having trouble doing so. The professor asked him to draw a picture to illustrate the way he thought of God. The student said he couldn't draw well so he would do it at home and bring it back to class. It happened to be around Christmastime, and when the seminary student returned, he brought an artist's drawing of an extra-large, angry, demanding Scrooge-type person, sitting behind a desk with pen in hand and his debit-credit ledger before him. In front of Scrooge, standing in terror, was Bob Cratchett. Pointing to Scrooge, the young man said, "That's God." Pointing to Cratchett, he said, "That's me."

We might cringe at the thought of such a God, but is there a part of us who might just understand such a perspective? In all of us, there may be some difference between how we talk about God and how we feel deep down about God. Another way to put it is that the God of our minds may not be the same as the God of our feelings. Long-time author Maxie Dunnam noted that how we feel about God is the most determinative factor in our relationship with God. Deep down we might perceive God as one who keeps accounts of what we do and waits for us to step out of line. Some of us, on the other hand, may see God as the gotcha god like a private investigator always following and gathering evidence. For some, there is the "Sitting Bull" kind of god who remains in a yoga position expecting burnt offerings. Then there is the philosopher god who is distant, cold, too-busy, and has a "Do not disturb" sign on the door. Finally, some perceive a pharaoh god who is constantly harsh and demanding, barking out commands like "Make more bricks." These perspectives, which branch out of our feelings down deep, prevent us from real and lasting spiritual growth in our lives. In order to move on to

the encouragement James is providing in the rest of his book, we have to first and foremost turn loose of these images and embrace God as the faithful giver of all good gifts, as the Source of constant care and purpose, as the One who has given birth to us and implanted wisdom in us so that we are empowered to live differently.

Then James takes us to the next point of spiritual growth and that is becoming doers of the word, and not merely hearers of the word. We have heard the phrases “walk the talk” and “actions speak louder than words” which take their lead from this text. It is something we try to take seriously in this congregation. Three years ago, when the Board decided we would welcome Carr Fire evacuees, especially those with pets who could not stay at the Red Cross shelter, we had no clue how it would shape our ministry, our beliefs, our very community. Just over a week ago, we found ourselves in a similar situation once more and this time there was no hesitation in opening up our doors to strangers in need. The idea even caught on for our Methodist and UCC friends who did the same. Interacting with our friends next door has been an unexpected blessing – surprises like hand-made thank you cards from the children, genuine gratitude from the adults, new friendships with the four-legged visitors, and stories of these people’s lives which have been fascinating. One of the women is from the Seneca tribe, raised in a teepee in her early years, and has travelled all over the US. In all her travels, however, she can’t stop saying how amazed she is with this church, with you folks and how nice you have been to her. In her 88 years of living, she never knew that there were people like yourselves, never knew people could be so nice. Be doers of the word, says James.

However, we all stumble at times and as grateful as we are to God for the privilege of putting our faith into action, every one of us still has work to do to be more than just hearers of

the word. Even the best of us at times have been stained by the world's values in order to get what we want. An old saying comes to mind, "The thing that makes people and rivers crooked is following the lines of least resistance." The deadly flooding of Tennessee rivers a week ago is an example out of nature of the results which occur when the path of least resistance is followed without recourse. However, most of us, I hope, have not gone so far off course as the college student who once approached her professor hoping beyond hope to pass his course after failing two times before. Determined to succeed this time, she went to his office and quietly closed the door behind her. The professor asked what he could do for her? She drew closer and sat upon his desk, flipped her hair back, batted her eyes and said flirtatiously, "Professor, I would do anything to pass this class." She then leaned forward and whispered, "I mean, I would do... anything." The professor returned her gaze, "Anything?" "Anything!" she replied. The professor's voice dropped to a whisper and said, "Would you maybe... study?"

James counsels us towards a practical morality where not only do our words matter but how we listen matters. Be quick to listen and slow to speak, he says. That is so very hard for us, but communication is critical as we seek to live as Christians. Whereas our technology provides us with a means to listen to the depths of the oceans, to distant planets, to a baby in the womb, to plants and even brain waves, we seldom listen to each other. We need to be people who actively listen until we hear and to realize that sometimes what people say is not what they mean. We need to listen until we hear the deeper, unspoken meanings and yearnings that others sometimes do not or cannot express. Being a doer of the word means learning to actively listen and hear those around us. James even touches upon anger, specifically, the destructive forms of anger. Anger can be constructive when it alerts us to

wrongdoing or injustices which can then be channeled in ways that lead to protest and improvement. But destructive anger is the kind that eats us up from the inside and causes a break in relationships with others and with God. Such anger is often born out of an inability to truly listen. Be doers of the word and not just hearers, says James.

From the many stories of doers which came out of the World War II era, one is of a Methodist church that opened the doors of its cellars, making them into shelters. The pastor and volunteers stayed there for five years supervising the welfare of thousands, putting service ahead of services. Embracing a God, not of vengeance or fear, but Giver of all Good Gifts, we seek to do likewise that our actions shall match our words in all things by the grace of God, Amen.