

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 1, 2024, The 15th Sunday After Pentecost/The 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Micah 6:6-8, James 1:17-27

HEARERS AND DOERS

There is a story I heard in college that has stayed with me all my life because it was such a powerful story and parable. I went to a Presbyterian College for 3 of my 4 years, and because it had ties to the church I went to college with a lot of PKs (Pastor's Kids) and (MK's) missionary's kids. One day in class, a woman whose parents were missionaries in India told the story of a long train ride in a very crowded train. She told us not to think of our trains here in the U.S., but instead to imagine an old train with wooden benches, open windows without screens, people filling the benches and spilling out into the aisles. She said think: overly crowded, dusty, hot, and the humidity of southern India.

She told us that her family was sitting near a young boy who was travelling alone; he was only 8 or 9 years old and wasn't on a seat but out in the aisle. In the push and crowdedness of that train he became scared and began to cry. She was watching all this very closely because she was close to his age.

An elderly man, seeing the young boy's distress, left his seat and crouched down beside the boy so that they were face to face. He took his hand, and began to talk quietly to him. Slowly the boy's sobs ended and he leaned in to listen to what this grandfather of a man was saying to him.

She said what was amazing was that this grandfather crouched beside that young boy for the next 5 hours of the train ride, down in the dirt and the dust, the heat and the crowdedness of the floor. That grandfather of a man never left his side.

She said she felt like she had seen Jesus that day, in the way that old man showered love and care on that scared child, with no concern for himself or his aching joints. That experience stayed with her as a picture of Jesus' caring heart and life, and I've always been thankful that she shared it with the rest of us.

James says: "But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." James says that God's word has been planted inside each of us. We've heard it, but now what are we going to do about it?

James is writing this letter to people who are already people of faith; he is writing to us. As one author puts it, "This letter was written to help us Christians learn how to live as Christians. This letter is not that interested in reminding us of what we believe. Or how we worship. But in how to live. It is a very practical letter, in that sense."

<https://mypastoralponderings.com/2021/08/28/being-doers-of-the-word-my-sermon-on-james-117-27/>

And what is James's advice to Christians?

- v. 19 Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slower to anger.
- v. 21 With meekness, welcome the word of God that has been planted in your heart.
- v. 22 Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.
- v. 26 If you act religious but don't hold your tongue from anger and hurtful words you are fooling yourself about your faith.
- v. 27 Care for widows and orphans, or as the Message translation puts it, care for "the homeless and loveless in their plight."

So, the bottom line is to act on what you hear (The Message translation). Act on what God says about love, about inclusion, about the power of your words for good or for evil, about reaching out to those in need, about seeing everyone through God's eyes.

James says: “Be hearers and doers of God's word. Act on what you hear (The Message).”

In the book *The End of Your Life Book Club*, the author Will Schwalbe tells the story of a book club he and his mother formed as she fought her last battle with cancer. Through all her chemo treatments and hospital visits they decided to read the same books together so they would have things to talk about during the long hours of treatment. He writes this about their discussion of the book *Gilead*. (A book by the way, if you've never read it, I highly recommend).

Schwalbe writes:

“One of Mom's favorite passages from *Gilead* was (quote): ‘This an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, ‘What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?’

She (His mother) thought about his question, she said, as much as she could—whenever she met refugees, bus drivers, or new colleagues. She thought about it now when she went for chemo and met the nurses, the doctor, the woman who scheduled appointments, other people with cancer and their families. The answer was different for every person and every situation. But the question from *Gilead*, Mom said, was always the thing you needed to ask yourself: ‘What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?’ It helped you remember that people aren't here for you; everyone is here for one another.

Will Schwalbe, *The End of Your Life Book Club*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, pp. 96-97

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Years ago, in a church I served, there was a high schooler who came into my office with a problem, I'll call him Dave. He had befriended another boy, Jack, who was new in town and lived at the edges of their high school society; one of those quiet people out on the margins that most people didn't even see, or really want to see. Jack also went to our church. Dave knew Jack was lonely, and home life wasn't easy so he befriended him. At school, he invited him to sit at their lunch table with his other friends. He told me that he knew Jesus wanted him to be a friend to this lonely guy, but he was getting grief from his friends, and honestly, he didn't always want to be around Jack either because he was just so different from other people.

His friends kept pushing, and asking him what was wrong with him that he was hanging out with such a loser. They started to say they wouldn't sit with Dave at lunch any more if he kept letting Jack sit with them. He made the painful decision to stand up to his friends and didn't ask Jack to leave; the friends stayed but never talked to Jack. Throughout the next three years of high school Dave remained Jack's friend. People didn't understand why, sometimes he didn't understand why he put himself through it, but he knew it was what Jesus wanted.

Decades later Dave contacted me and told me that Jack called him out of the blue. He told Dave that he wanted to thank him for their friendship during high school. Jack said: “What you didn't know was that I was suicidal every day of high school, I wanted to die, every single day. But then I'd come to school and you'd smile at me and talk to me, and I knew I could go on for another day.”

James says: “Be hearers and doers of God's word. ‘Act on what you hear’ (The Message).”

In August of 2021 our Presbytery of Great Rivers met by Zoom; *everyone* met by Zoom in was

2021! They broke us into small zoom groups to discuss the passage we're reading from James this morning. A woman in our group, who was an Elder at one of the Springfield churches, shared a story with us. I shared it with you then, and it needs to be told again today. She said she had always lived in the Springfield area and has many friends there. Just before the Covid shut downs in March of 2020, two of the women in her circle of friends experienced the deaths of their husbands.

This woman and her friends became concerned for these two women who were now separated from their family and friends because of Covid shut downs, and living completely alone for the first time in decades.

So, this circle of friends decided that every single day they would gather by Zoom together to support these two women who were so recently widowed and now totally alone. From March of 2020 forward they did not stop checking in with these women by Zoom every single day, and listening for as long as was needed.

Every single day they walked the grief journey with these two friends who were alone in their homes.

When I met this woman, they had been showing up every single day for 18 months for their friends. Day by day they gave the gift of listening hearts to two friends who were now widows.

James says: “Be hearers and doers of God’s word. ‘Act on what you hear’ (The Message).”

I have a dear clergy friend who is always teaching me about ministry. When there was the tragic death of a high schooler in her community, she went up to the high school as soon as she heard the news. She spent that first day at the school while the students, teachers and staff were dealing with the devastating news of this death. During the day she followed the class schedule of that deceased teenager, sitting in on each of her classes in case someone needed her to listen, or to hug, or to care.

She didn't preach, she didn't hand out scripture verses, she hugged and held and listened.

She was the face and arms of Christ in those classrooms that first heartbreaking day.

James says: “Be hearers and doers of God’s word. ‘Act on what you hear’ (The Message).”

Finally, I have a poem from one of my favorite singer-song writers, Carrie Newcomer. If you don't know the music of this musical poet, I encourage you to go exploring. This poem is from her book of poetry entitled: *Until Now: New Poems*.

What You Won't Hear on Cable News

I want to tell you
 What you won't hear on cable news.
 About a young woman in the airport
 Who was so exhausted and harried
 By hours of delay
 And wrangling an overtired toddler
 That when her little boy
 Finally and completely
 Melted down
 And planted himself on the floor,
 She sat down beside him
 And started to cry.

I want to tell you about five random women

Who immediately flowed in from all directions.
 One pulled out a little toy from her purse,
 One offered a snack or to go get something to drink,
 One who called the child "Honey"
 Wiped his nose with a tissue
 And offered another one to the grateful mother.
 And the one who asked if it was alright
 To walk hand in hand with the child
 Right there at the gate,
 Close by and always, always in sight.

I want to tell you about a man
 Who makes soup and bread
 And then gives it away.
 And the nurse who held his hand
 When he was breathless and afraid.

I want to tell you about my neighbor
 Who drives around all winter
 With snow chains in his car
 Just in case someone needs help.

I want to tell you about all the people I meet
 Who keep extending themselves,
 And braving the risk
 Of being told
 It's none of their business.
 Who offer a hand,
 Or a bit of encouragement,
 Or a couple of bucks.
 Who will walk a fussy child around the gate.
 Because it is the kind thing to do.

I want to tell you the world still turns
 Every single day
 On an axis of goodness
 And unexpected grace
 That shows up without fanfare
 And often where we least expect to find it.

By Carrie Newcomer, From *Until Now: New Poems*

James says: "Be hearers and doers of God's word. 'Act on what you hear' (The Message)."

May you and I be good actors with listening hearts, in Jesus' name and for Jesus' sake. Amen