

Pastor's Message – 9/1/24  
James 1:17-27

I came across this story many years ago, but it's a good one and well-worth repeating. It seems this fellow has a parrot who swears like an old salt. The bird is a pistol. He can swear for five minutes straight without repeating himself. Trouble is, the guy who owns him is a quiet, conservative type, and the bird's foul mouth is driving him nuts.

One day, it just gets to be too much. The guy grabs the bird by the throat, shakes him really hard and yells, "QUIT IT!" But this just makes the bird mad, and he swears more than ever.

Then the guy gets angry and says, "Okay, you asked for it" and locks the bird in a kitchen cabinet. This really aggravates the bird, who claws and scratches. When the guy finally lets him out, the bird cuts loose with a stream of vulgarities that would make a sailor blush.

At that point, the guy is so mad that he throws the bird into the freezer. For the first few seconds, there is a terrible din. The bird kicks and claws and thrashes. Then it suddenly gets very quiet.

At first the guy just waits, but then he starts to think that the bird may be hurt. After a couple of minutes of silence, he's so worried that he opens up the freezer door.

The bird meekly climbs onto the man's outstretched arm and says, "Awfully sorry about the trouble I gave you. I'll do my best to improve my vocabulary from now on."

The man is astounded and amazed at the transformation that has come over the parrot. Then the parrot says, "By the way, what did the chicken do?"

That story has connections to our Bible reading for today and for the next few weeks. After spending 5 weeks in the gospel of John on Jesus as the Bread of Life, today we begin a 5 week series based on the Epistle of James. The Epistle of James is heavy on the practicals of the Christian life and so is important for us to reflect on. John 3:16 is a favorite of many, but James will insist that salvation is more than just believing, it must include action as well.

Although it is classified as an epistle because it begins, as other New Testament letters do, with a greeting, it doesn't really follow the classical Greek form of a letter. Rather, beginning with chapter two, it is more like a collection of essays about faith and the journey toward perfection. Chapter one, from which this week's reading is taken, serves as a kind of introduction to what lies ahead. This week, James begins to raise the questions which we will be addressing in the next month or so.

The reading from James this week, the first in a series of five weeks from this sometimes spurned epistle, Martin Luther called it an "epistle of straw" since James does not really mention God at all, is often experienced and preached as "admonitory moral instruction" — and with good reason. The Letter of James is hands-on, practical advice on a whole range of matters of Christian discipleship, with a strong tone of warning for those who choose not to follow the advice given.

While this form of writing would have had a loyal following among a good number of first-century people and even some in contemporary societies, many in contemporary Western cultures would find it very hard to hear. Some may be simply turned off by it completely.

James lays out four basic presuppositions which you may or may not agree with. He writes:

If we ask with faith, God, who is the giver of all gifts, will deliver (James 1:5-8). In other words, if we believe and whatever we ask, God will provide.

God raises up the lowly and brings low the rich (James 1:9-11). God turns economics upside down; God has a special place in his heart for the poor and oppressed.

God does not send trials and temptations to us as tests. God does not lead us into temptation. Our trials come as a result of our sinful desires (James 1:12-16). Whatever bad things happen to us is the result of our own actions.

Everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God (James 1: 17-18). Any good things we may have accomplished are only the result of God's gift.

I'd like to invite and challenge you to think about these statements and consider whether you agree or disagree. My guess is that if we are being completely honest, some would have to confess that many Christians do not live as if we believe what James has said is true. Maybe the real truth we need to confess is that our acceptance or denial of these "truths" may depend on how much or how little we possess.

For example, people who possess a fair amount of wealth may not believe, much less put into practice, the notion that God's desire is to raise up the lowly and bring low the rich. Some rich people, or even some people of moderate means, seem to live as if they believe the exact opposite of that. Why else would people with wealth ever oppose tax increases to support the poor, or vote to deny access to health care for all people or the rezoning of school districts to bring less affluent families into better school systems? Why else would they refuse to expand welfare systems or provide health care programs to help more people?

And what about trials and temptations? Do we accept James' assumption that when bad things happen to people, it is not a test from God or the actions of the devil, but the result of our own selfish or sinful desires? That can be a hard notion to swallow.

What about the notion that if we ask God for something with faith, God will deliver? And do we believe or live as if everything we own and everything we are is a gracious gift from God? If we did live as if we believed that, how would it change our lifestyles, especially with regard to our generosity toward others or our giving to the Church?

James offers us advice and warning strung together like a necklace of pearls. Cut the string and the pearls end up rolling around the floor. Remove one of the pieces of advice and the Christian lifestyle unravels.

If you've played on any sports team, or even had a personal fitness coach, you know what it's like to have a coach give you direction. The coach is directive. Do this. Do more of this. Don't do that. Not that. This. Right. Now more of that.

When this kind of communication is coming from a coach, someone we know understands what it takes to play the game or build muscle or cardiovascular endurance, we don't take the directiveness negatively. We take it for what it is. Hands-on help. Coach knows what I need and we need as a team. And Coach knows that when I'm practicing, I need to practice the right things in the right ways so I'm wired to have the right reaction automatically when I need to.

For whatever reason, when it comes to living our faith, we may be less receptive to such strong directiveness.

Maybe you've had a job in which you were paid by commission. Certainly you know jobs that are paid that way. To someone who works on commission, there are few more disheartening words from a browsing customer than when in response to a polite "May I help you?" one hears "No thanks, I'm just looking."

"Just looking" -- What it mostly means is "Go away, I have no intention of buying anything here." Sometimes we go "just looking" because we're bored. We browse the internet looking on one website after another, simultaneously overwhelmed by all the choices before us and uninterested in what seems to be just "more of the same."

Sometimes we go "just looking" to sneak a peek at all those things that are beyond our reach. Ever pretend to be studying the photos of yachts for sale down at a marina? Or ever walk through the showroom of a Porsche dealership, checking out the latest models you won't be buying? Or maybe you prefer trying on a few diamonds and rubies, just to see how they look on your finger? "Sorry, just looking."

But some people spend all their lives "just looking" -- never willing to invest their energies or emotions or economic security in anything because of the risks involved. People who are permanently "just looking" drift in and out of jobs without ever finding a vocation; they drift in and out of relationships without ever daring to love; they drift in and out of communities without ever casting a vote or dropping anchor; and they drift in and out of the church without ever opening their hearts to the spirit of God or feeling the pulse of Christ's body.

The text from James today reveals the author obviously felt a similar sense of frustration with would-be Christians who were bystanders and bench-warmers. The writer reminds us that just hearing the word, the good news of Jesus Christ, is not enough. We must be "doers who act." A biblical faith finds plenty of precedence for action without a plan, but very little evidence of plans without action.

- Abraham didn't have a plan ... but he packed up and left home.
- Moses didn't have a clue ... but he confronted Pharaoh with an ultimatum.
- Rahab didn't have a friend ... but she hid Joshua's spies to Jericho.
- Elijah didn't have a hope ... but he defeated all the prophets of Ba'al.
- Nehemiah didn't have a country ... but he rebuilt the Wall of Jerusalem.
- Mary didn't have a name ... but she bore the Son of God.
- John the Baptist didn't have a home ... but he made the wilderness his pulpit.
- Peter didn't have a backbone ... but he became the "rock" of the church.
- Saul of Tarsus didn't have a heart ... but Paul became the spokesman for the Gentiles.
- Jesus didn't have a sin ... but he suffered and died on the cross for our sake and our salvation.

Faithful Christians must be doing, not "just looking."

Remember the first time you drove a car? I remember my first car. It was a sky blue 1971 Ford Maverick with a three-speed transmission on the column. I thought I could drive it right off the lot, but I can't count how many times I killed the engine driving it home from the dealership that first time.

Our passage from James today reminds me of the movie, Rain Man, especially the scene in which the character played by Dustin Hoffman repeatedly tells his brother, played by Tom Cruise, "I am an excellent driver." Well, he wasn't, of course. It takes a lot to learn to drive a standard transmission and even when I became proficient with my clutch cars, I would still occasionally kill the engine.

Learning to walk in faithfulness is a lot like learning to drive. Reading the Bible, praying, attending worship, living out the gospel can be confusing. But to not act on faith is like sitting in the

car without starting the engine. For those of us who have been driving for years, all the little things of driving are second nature to us now. If we live our faith as diligently and as completely as we can, acting on our faith in recognition of the grace we have been given will become a part of us as well. Walking faithfully is a matter of everyday persistence and not a once and done.

James offers us warnings today, but he also offers encouragement. The Waupun United Methodist Church is doing exciting ministry, and we need to celebrate that and talk about it. People like to belong to churches that are doing what Jesus has commanded Christians to do. People are energized by churches who are living out their faith and making a difference.

The letter of James may not sound a whole lot like a first-century compliment machine, but its message can be heard as enlightening and empowering. James implored his readers to first be “hearers of the word” and, having heard the truth, to act on it (James 1:22-23). For James, that “word of truth” is a “perfect gift” from God, through which God “gave birth” to humanity as the “first fruits” of all his creatures (vv. 17-18). In other words, the truth about God’s love for us has been with us from the beginning.

Our former Bishop heard these words. He told Annual Conferences many times over the course of his leadership of those Annual Conferences that we are “beautiful people.” He repeated that compliment over and over again during his time as Bishop in Wisconsin, calling clergy and laity his “beautiful people.” James, too, today reminds us just how special we are, that we are God’s “beautiful people.” James tells us that we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created” (v. 18c). We are the best of God’s creation -- not scooped up from the bottom of some cosmic barrel. We are the “crème de la crème,” the best of the cream that rises to the very top.

God isn’t making us the best there is so we can be the best for ourselves. God intends to make us the best there is for the sake of and as a sign of God’s loving intent for all other creatures. God creates us and blesses us that we might be a blessing to others – to use our gifts that others might be blest.

If God’s going to do that in us, there are some things we need to know to cooperate. And we need to get them right. And for many of these, it will take some practice, some hard practice, to get them right. We need Coach James to remind and keep reminding us. And he does.

And then when you’ve heard the word, just do it. Hearing truth isn’t enough. It’s doing it that gets it planted deep in you. It won’t make you who God is trying to make you unless you act on it, wire it into your body, not just your brain. Do it. That will make it stick. That will let the implanted word grow in you. That will make it impossible to forget who you are and who God is making you to be. Do it (verses 22-24).

That’s James’ message: Listen, and do it. Every day.

We’re going to hear more of that as we move through the Letter of James. Maybe next week, we can talk about proper dress for worship or the seating chart in worship. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, we’ll talk about tongues. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, we’ll talk about who we’re closer to: God or the devil. Then, finally, on the 29<sup>th</sup>, we’ll hear about the responsibilities of elders, those members of the Church who have been in the church, perhaps for a long time, those who have committed themselves to living out their faith in the Church and about our responsibility to pray for each other and care for each other.

There are certainly signs of God’s presence in our midst: in our churches and in the individuals who make up the churches. Still, we all have a long way to go. And we can make it. We can be made perfect by God’s grace. In this life and in the life to come.