

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 30, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

James 1:17-27

“Walking by Faith: Practical Religion”

When people hear the word “religion,” what do you think comes to mind? What do *you* think “religion” means? This word might convey a system of beliefs and doctrines that are most often spiritual in nature: what to believe, how to think. “Religion” might evoke images of a stern and unfriendly culture that spends a lot of time talking about what you shouldn’t do. You could picture a group of old-time Puritans in black dress, whose faces never seem to smile. The culture might have rites and practices that seem unusual to people on the outside. There are those in our world who say that “religion” often leads to more trouble than it’s worth, inciting conflict between people and cultures – sometimes even within the same community. If we reflect on history (either ancient or recent) or survey the political environment in which we live, it wouldn’t be all that hard to understand just how “religion” has been regarded in our cultural mindset. So what does “religion” really mean, apart from whatever prejudices have been heaped upon the word? Generally speaking, it is a system of beliefs and practices that provide norms for the life of its adherents. In that sense, Christianity is very much “religion.” If, then, we seek to walk by faith as Christian people, how does what we believe shape and norm our lives?

Look first to what we believe as Christians: what does our teaching have to say that is relevant to the human condition? Does it have anything to say to the high school graduate in Kansas? The young urban professional in D.C.? The hungry family in a shack in Haiti? The disillusioned doctor in Europe or the widower farmer in China? Our religion teaches that we all contend with this problem we call “sin” that messes up the world and separates us from God, and that nothing that we do – no matter how hard we might try – can take care of the problem. But our religion also teaches that God is constantly good, and that is the way that He relates to His creation. He is “the Father of lights,” as James writes, the shaper of stars. All truly good gifts come from Him. And we believe that He gave the best gift in Himself, God’s Son, Jesus. Our religion teaches that Jesus, being both fully God and fully man, lived and died on the cross in our place, to take care of the problem of sin for us. That is the gospel, what James calls “the word of truth” through which God saves us and brings us into new life. The reality of the gospel shapes the life of the believer.

Authentic Christianity possesses an intimate relationship between belief and action: **it is practical religion because it is meant to be a practiced religion.** That’s a central theme of James’ letter, and in our epistle lesson today, he makes an explicit connection between *hearing* and *doing*. For the Christian, faith isn’t just “head knowledge” or a feeling that is in the heart, it is God the Holy Spirit at work in us to make us more like Jesus. We’re called to act on that word which has been implanted in us, called each and every day to live out the reality of the gospel in our relationships, in our recreation, in our responsibilities. God calls us to obedience, and that’s a state that is foreign to our thinking. As we walk by faith, we come to see that we need to be intentional in the practice of our faith. There are areas in our lives in which we know we particularly struggle with sin and disobedience, where we are tempted to merely hear the word but then walk away and forget it. We Christians are like soldiers in that we need to be in a state of readiness for when the enemy attacks. We don’t just read the briefing or the textbook; we need to drill and practice to prepare for the time of battle. Today, James highlights two areas of life where our hearing – what we believe – must inform our doing: **communication** and **caring**.

For almost every human being on the planet, communication is a struggle. I don’t mean that it’s hard to communicate (we can usually make ourselves understood) but communication with other

people is most always a battleground waiting to happen. When we're talking with another person, it might only take a few words to wreck a previously pleasant conversation. And should we feel offended, well! We likely jump right in with an angry or reckless reply, to give as good as we get. But James encourages us to be **quick to hear** when interacting with the people around us, not "quick to talk." Hearing – or more accurately, listening – can be one of the first things to go when communication is not being shaped by belief. Why spend time hearing and listening *when you already know that you're right*? But, alas, it turns out that we're not right as often as we might think. Instead of pushing our words onto another person, the first attitude of a Christian in conversation is to voluntarily hold back, to listen to what the other has to say. Being quick to hear, we can be **slow to speak**. We can watch our words and control our tongues which so often end up taking us in the wrong direction. As our communication is shaped by our beliefs, listening to the people around us, refraining from talking too soon, we can also be **slow to anger**. Here, James is writing of that selfish anger that we might feel, especially when we're frustrated with the people around us, frustrated that they do not seem to understand what we're saying – or that they don't agree with what we're saying. Selfish anger gains us nothing and has no place in the Christian life. Instead, we are called to practice patience. Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger: our religion guides our communication.

Our religion also shapes our caring – our connecting with the people around us, the people outside of ourselves with whom we are in fellowship. Our beliefs call us to live out our faith be sharing the reality of God's gift in the gospel with those in our midst who are in need. Throughout Scripture, widows and orphans exemplified such people in need, and James again uses them as an example for people who seek to live out true religion. I encourage you to take up James' suggestion in your own life as a Christian. There are people in our own congregation who, though they may not be widows and orphans, could use this Christian connection. You hear the names of people who are homebound or in the hospital in our prayer requests, and you might know personally of others who, because of age, infirmity, or other cause are kept away from worship and regular fellowship. Take time to go and visit them in their need. Home and hospital visits can and should be made by many Christians, not just pastors! Being with other people in their time of need is a gift from God, a gift that He gives through you.

In these two areas of communication and caring, we can begin to see how our faith motivates our behavior. But as James' message continues, we'll see that true Christianity is a practical religion throughout. It's more than rite and rituals, it's more than a collection of facts. If that's what religion has been to you, listen anew the word of truth, the gospel, and consider what God would have it be, how He is calling you to daily practice what you believe. Towards the end of our reading, in verse 25, James writes of a believer who is a "doer who acts." The force conveyed in the original Greek of this text can come across as "**doer of action**," an "active doer." Our communication, our caring, comes from our faith, a faith which is lived, walking as God's people. This is true, practical religion.

As we go out this day, moved by God's grace, may we be "doers of action" in faith!

Amen.