

Proper 17 B (3) Sermon

Sunday, August 30, 2009, 10am Service

The Reverend Poulson Reed

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in high school, I attended Saint James's church in downtown Richmond, Virginia. High above the altar, in great, big, gold letters, for all to see, were the famous words from the Letter of James that we heard this morning, though in the King James translation: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."

"Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." Those words stuck with me in my formative years. I wasn't quite sure what they meant – what did it mean exactly to be a **doer of the word**? But I liked them. They sounded real, and active, and said something, I sensed, about Christian authenticity. They reminded me of that sports slogan: don't just talk the talk; walk the walk.

The letter of James doesn't usually get much attention in church. It doesn't come around that often in our lectionary cycle. And when it does, it's easy to overlook in comparison to the gospels.

Perhaps some of this neglect arises from this epistle's tendentious relationship with the Protestant reformation, which, incorrectly, thought it undermined Paul's stance on justification by faith.

The letter of James is one of the so-called Catholic, or general epistles, not directed to a particular congregation, but seemingly to us all. It does lack some of the theological heights of Paul, but does so intentionally, instead choosing to focus on faith in daily life.

Which James wrote it we do not know for sure, but one tradition holds that it was James, the brother of Jesus. We can imagine James

observing Jesus for all Jesus' life, and then, later, writing with humility about how we might live in the way that Jesus called us to.

That's a message I think Christians of today desperately need to hear. Not what do we believe, but how do we live the life of faith?

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers, who deceive themselves.” How easy it is to fall into the trap that it is our belief alone that makes us a Christian. If I believe the right things, I will have done what I need to be right with God. I have faith, we say. I come to church every Sunday, and believe at least most of what I hear, with a few fingers crossed.

But true religion bears fruit in what we do on days other than Sunday, in the way that we live our lives. As the Protestant reformers argued so strenuously centuries ago, our works, what we do, cannot justify us. Only God's grace can do that.

But a vibrant faith leads naturally to living out our faith in our lives, just as one of those beautiful Arizona citrus trees that is well nourished with some water and lots of sunlight, and good soil, will bear good fruit. Well nurtured, it cannot help but do so.

The Letter of James prods each of us with the uncomfortable question: are we hearers of the word only, content to come to church and listen to the words of Jesus, without applying them?

But what does it **look** like to be a doer of the word? The letter of James gives some concrete examples: caring for those most in need, being quick to listen but slow to speak, refraining from anger, and staying unstained by the world, in other words, making an effort to conform our lives to Jesus, and not to the values of the world around us.

Being a doer of the word looks slightly different for each of us, depending on our gifts, circumstances, and responsibilities. It is a daily discipline: how do I live this day in the manner in which Jesus lived his days. How would Jesus have me live my life?

How many of you have ever watched reality tv?

Think of it this way. I call it the reality TV test. If a hidden camera followed you around for a day, say a Monday or a Wednesday, and never interviewed you, but just observed, would someone who saw the footage know you are a Christian? Would they know, just from seeing how you treated people, and what you did and didn't do?

When we are at work, or at home, with friends and family, or walking down the sidewalk, does the way that we treat people, and in particular the way we react to others' suffering **show** Christian compassion?

Could you pass the reality TV test? Would the viewers know you are a follower of Jesus?

How empty and corroding is a faith that does not bear the fruit of good works. Living only for itself, it degrades the image of God in us, the image of our God-given true selves.

This can happen both in institutions and in individuals. I remember once worshipping in a church while I was out of town on vacation. It was glorious worship, with stunning music and thoughtful preaching. But there was something lifeless about the place, that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Then I looked at the announcement sheet. There was no outreach to the community around it at all, and no conscious welcoming of the

stranger. The church was so focused on its interior life that it forgot about cooperating with God in God's mission outside its walls.

I'm sure we've all met individuals, too, who were hearers but not doers of the word. They are eager to talk about how strong their faith is, but don't hesitate in the next breath to say something nasty about a colleague. Someone is weeping the hallway, and they walk right by. They are those about whom Jesus speaks, quoting the prophet Isaiah, in today's gospel: "they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

In contrast, when we see someone, or a group, or a church really doing the word, it is striking, and inspiring. I remember reading about a church group from the South that went to New York several weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They wanted to help that devastated city in a unique but humble way.

They had heard that the dust in the aftermath of the attacks had dirtied apartments for miles, causing health problems, including difficulty breathing and depression. So they bought cleaning supplies, and went door to door, offering to clean apartments for free.

Some people turned them down, suspicious of their offer, but others took them up on it. Many sick and elderly, in particular, were grateful for the cleaning, which they were not able to do themselves. The group didn't proselytize, but if asked, they revealed that they were a part of a church that had wanted to find a way to serve.

What is my vision for All Saints', several people have asked me. It's a good question, but my question is: what is God's vision for All Saints'? I don't yet know the answer, but I am certain that it will involve being nurtured by worship and study for a purpose that really makes a difference. This is a wonderful church, and I cannot tell you how excited I am to be here. But part of that excitement comes from the possibility of exploring together what amazing things God has in

mind for us. We have not yet discovered the fullness of God's intent for us.

How might God be willing to work through us? And what perfect gifts of good works from above might be waiting for us, and only us, to do them? Amen.