**Text**: **James 1: 17-27**

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

# Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” The Gospel of the Lord.

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I have decided today to preach on the lesson from the book of James today and not the Gospel reading from Mark. As I read both passages this week, for some reason I just kept being drawn to the words from James.

Now, I have to say that the words from Mark's Gospel are intriguing. Jesus is having an argument with some religious leaders over the washing of one's hands and food before eating. The religious leaders were bringing up the tradition of the elders - ritual purity laws outlined in the Old Testament - and they were accusing Jesus’ disciples and, indirectly, Jesus himself of not following those laws; laws that had for centuries helped to define and direct the Jewish people - Jewish people like Jesus and his disciples.

That was the perspective of the religious leaders, but Jesus saw the issue a bit differently. Jesus’ concern was one of what truly causes impurity within a person – what really causes harm to a person’s soul. Jesus’ responded to the religious leaders’ accusation, not by saying that the law was unimportant, but instead by quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.”

I think more than anything those words from Isaiah brought me to the book of James - to the words from our lesson. In a way these words from Isaiah bridge the gap, at least for me, between these two readings. Isaiah’s words led me from Mark’s Gospel to the first chapter of James. These words suggest that faith in God - true faith in God (however that is understood) - true faith in God impacts the lives and the actions of the people who confess it. James is clearly making a strong bridge between our faith and our actions – seemingly suggesting that faith is only faith if it is reflected in the things that we do.

I feel the need to pause here because there is danger in carrying that connection between the actions of people – our works – and faith; that danger is especially a concern when our actions – our works – are then connected to salvation. It is actually part of the reason that Martin Luther had a problem with the book of James. It was 1 of 4 books in the New Testament that Martin Luther really did not want to be part of the New Testament Canon - the New Testament collection of books. James, along with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation were four books that Luther wanted to be eliminated from the New Testament. He felt that way because he believed that they went against the Protestant doctrines (the Protestant core beliefs) of grace alone and faith alone - doctrines that declare that we are saved by God's grace through faith. Salvation is God's action - it is not something that we can earn. (Does that sound familiar to anyone out there?)

Now, many of Luther’s contemporaries disagreed with him on removing those four books - in fact they strongly disagreed with him, believing he was going too far - so he did not get his way. But interestingly, to this day, the German language Luther Bible put those four books last in the New Testament.

So we have this lively tension as we dive into the book of James. The words that we find in James – both in today’s lesson and throughout the rest of the book – do strongly emphasize the importance of human actions and appear to suggest that the things that we do - our actions - can impact/can influence our salvation. We need to understand that is not the case. Again, we believe that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ - that is how we Lutherans believe salvation works.

With all of that said, these words teach us something powerful about life as a Christian – they teach us about something of true and practical importance for our faith journey. I want to focus on only two sections of this reading. The first is the line, “…be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

That seems to be very close to the quote from Isaiah that Jesus said to the religious leaders, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

Both passages suggest that our faith in God somehow and in some way manifests itself in the things that we do day in and day out. I know many of you have heard the following illustration that I am going to share with you before, but it is worth repeating; if for no other reason than because it was something my Mom said to me many times over the course of her life. She said that I was to live my life as a thank you note to God.

And what she meant by that was this: God gave each of us the gift of salvation through the sacrifice of his son, Jesus, on the cross. Through that sacrifice this gift was given and in baptism this gift becomes connected to us in a very precious and personal way. My life then – she was saying – is my way to show my thankfulness for the incredible gift that God has first given me.

My Mom would say, “John, God gave you the gift of life – life with Him now and life with Him forever. You can live your life as if that gift means nothing to you – just like some of the thank you notes I have seen you write look like you did not appreciate the gift you were given.

“Or, you can live your life as if you understand just how amazing the gift is that God gave you – like some of the other thank you notes you have written that say beautiful and kind and grateful things in appreciation to what you were given. The path you take is up to you. But if you truly understand the gift, I know which path you will take.”

Being a “doer of the word” can look different between you and me, someone down the street and someone half-way across the world. There is no single blueprint for the things that we do as children of God - but such activity absolutely involves moving outside of ourselves and moving towards someone else, particularly someone in need.

The lesson from James ends with the following words, which happens to be the other section from this passage I want to reflect on, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

As I read those words this past week and as I read them again right now, I find myself thinking, “What more needs to be said?” If we truly understand the depth of God’s love for us – for you, for me, for every other person in the world – we cannot help but respond. Our lives are our thank you notes to God for all that God has first done for us. We respond, not because we are striving to earn our salvation, but because we are striving to show how much we appreciate the gift of salvation that we have already freely been given. So we help those who need our help. We do for those who cannot do for themselves. We care for each and every person that is hurting or struggling. We support those who need assistance. We respond, not with judging and condemning eyes, but with kind and open hearts. We act – we act like the gift really matters. Amen