

Sept. 5, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 15
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

I think it's about time I got over my problem with the book from which comes today's epistle – the book of James. I've preached on James rarely over the years. I'm not alone. Lutheran Pastors generally preach on James much less than the other Epistles. One reason is that Martin Luther didn't preach much (if at all) on James. He didn't like it. He called it, "The Epistle of Straw."

But we should have better reasons for doing something than, "Martin Luther didn't like it." *Why* didn't Luther like James? One big reason is that Jesus Christ is not emphasized in James. As a matter of fact, the words, Jesus Christ, are only used twice in the whole book. Furthermore, there is not one mention of the cross. James does not talk, as does Paul, about Jesus' death on the cross and what it means for our sins. Baptism? Not one mention of it. On top of all this, you can look through the entire book and you will not find the word "grace" there – not even once.

Given all that, we *still* haven't hit on the main reason Luther didn't like James. It was his emphasis on *works*. St. Paul had stressed that we are saved by God's *grace* and not by works. *That* had turned Luther's life around. Faith – not works. But James says that we need to do good works in order to be a faithful Christian.

So, there you have it. That is why I, too, have frowned upon the book. But, as I say, I think it is time for me to get over it.

I have found a couple of things I like about the book of James. First of all, it stands as a corrective to Lutheran theology. For centuries we Lutherans have marched proudly under the banner of “salvation by faith alone” and we have reacted so sharply to anything resembling works righteousness ... so much so that we have looked down our nose at the concept of “good works” as somehow unorthodox.

James pulls us back a bit. His concepts played a big part in the Catholic/Lutheran agreement of 1999 in which the Roman Catholic Church finally conceded that we are saved only by faith and not by works while the Lutherans conceded that faith, by its very nature, will always produce good works. So, Paul can talk about grace and faith and James can talk about works. Maybe that’s why Paul’s books come before James’ in the Bible.

The second thing I like about James is that it is a book of action. It says that faith is no faith unless it is lived out. If it stays in the heart only, it is not faith. The advice he gives is action-advice. James asks, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” Last week we heard James summed it all up when he said this: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.” Faith without works, he said, is dead faith. We are all familiar with the quote, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.” James said that.

James’ emphasis on faith-in-action reminds of one of the most moving scenes in one of my all-time favorite movies, “On the Waterfront.” Karl Malden plays the part of Father Barry who stands in the hold of a ship where the mob has just spilled a load of cargo on a longshoreman who

was about to testify against them. As Father Barry gets eggs and bottles thrown at him he shakes his fist as he tells the dock workers about being doers of the word and not merely hearers.

He tells them, “Boys, this is my church! And if you don’t think Christ is down here on the’ waterfront, you’ve got another guess coming! Every morning when the hiring boss blows his whistle, Jesus stands alongside you on the dock. You! But remember, Christ is always with you. Christ is on the dock. He’s in the union hall. He’s kneeling right here beside this longshoreman they just attacked. And He’s sayin’ with all of you, if you do it to the least of mine, you do it to me! And what they did to him they’re doin’ to you. And only you ... with God’s help, have the power to knock ‘em out for good.” ... one of the best soliloquys in cinematography!

I like that kind of piety. “Piety” is a word which means “the way in which we express our faith.” Time was when I didn’t like that word very much because it connoted a person walking around with a Bible tucked up under their arm and their nose in the air thinking that they were all high-and-mighty because they didn’t drink, swear, or gamble and because they went to church every week and dropped the word “Lord” a lot in casual conversation ... all the while making sure their neighborhood stayed lily-white and that their church didn’t admit any of “those” people.

James has no patience with such piety. He says, “If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

That scolding was just a warm up. The next sentences would have scandalized them. He says, “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” Then he asks them a rhetorical question: Isn’t it the rich who oppress you? Aren’t they the ones who drag you into court? Aren’t they the ones who blaspheme the name of Jesus?”

Oh! The message is not, “God *accepts* the poor.” It is not, “God *tolerates* the poor” or “God *puts up with*” the poor. No! It is, “God *chooses* the poor.” “God *prefers* the poor.” “God *selects* the poor.”

This past week Afghan refugees have been landing by the hundreds and hundreds just a few miles from here. Some have only the clothes on their backs. Some don’t have shoes. No, there are not murderers and rapists among them. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services is working hands-on with them. I urge your support of that charity. Our Care and Justice Team is exploring ways CTS can help. The Afghan family we have re-settled and supported over the years – the Jawid’s – have asked our help in getting the rest of their family out of the country. We’re looking for ways to do that.

You will be hearing more about that, I am sure, in the coming weeks. It will give all of us a chance to be not hearers of the word only, but to be doers as well.