**James 1:17-27 (NRSV)**

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.

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me begin by letting you in on a little bit of a family feud. Martin Luther did not like the Epistle of James, the source of the New Testament epistle reading this morning. He called it an “epistle of straw.” That’s why Lutheran pastors will rarely preach from the Epistle of James.

Now, the author of the Epistle of James is traditionally thought to be James the Just, the brother of Jesus. James was a prominent disciple in the early church. Histories of the period say that he was

the head of the congregation in Jerusalem until he was executed by the Romans in the year 62. After that, the congregation in Jerusalem more or less disappeared and the future of the Christian faith was in the tiny congregations along the rim of the Mediterranean.

One of the reasons that Luther didn't like the Epistle of James very much was that James doesn't seem to have a very sophisticated theology. James doesn't talk much about the Cross, James doesn't talk about Jesus and the Trinity, James doesn't talk about justification by grace through faith. And most important, James ***does*** talk about living a good life, in a way that Luther thought was very dangerous.

Now, Luther wasn't opposed to living a good life, far from it. Luther just felt, ***very strongly***, that living a good life was not how we become reconciled to God, how we become right with God. Luther knew that we could never live a good enough life for that. Luther knew that only God reaching out to us in grace could make us right with God. This was a key insight for Luther and he clung tightly to it all his life. So tightly that he couldn't see much good in the Epistle of James and didn't really want to try.

Now, if we keep Luther's insight in mind, that we cannot make God love us more or approve of us more by how well we live, that still leaves us the question of how we should live, knowing that we ***are*** loved and accepted by God. For James, this really resolves into two questions – who is God? – and, who are we?

Who is God? James tells us this in the beginning of the reading who God is – God is the one who gives, who gives us everything, who gives us life, who gives us the word of truth, who is constant and consistent, unchanging and unfailing.

And who are we? We are the first fruits of God's creation, and I think what James is saying here is that we are to be the evidence of God's goodness, God's mercy for his creation, God's intention to

transform the world. And not just the evidence, but the ***agents*** of God's intention to reclaim the world. That's why how we live is crucial. Not because it will save us – that's already accomplished. But rather because through us, with us, God will save the world.

Now, being saved, being reconciled to God, this is a very good thing. But some of us think that that is the main thing, the only thing. I was listening to a preacher once who said, "Every time people criticize me or complain about me, I say to myself, 'I'm going to heaven.'" And I thought, "What an awful self-centered goof. You're going to heaven and that's all that matters. Well, don't let me hold you up. Start now."

This is what James is talking about when he talks about "Hearers" and not "Doers" of the word. "Hearers" of the word are people who can look at their salvation as if they were looking in the mirror and admiring themselves, saying, "Boy, do I look good. I'm goin' to heaven." And they forget who they are and whose they are, where they are and why it is that they are ***here***. And their religion is, in James' memorable phrase, "worthless." And the word James uses makes clear what he means – empty, futile, ineffectual and even deceptive.

The situation is similar in today's Gospel lesson. The disciples are accused by the Pharisees of eating with "defiled" hands, that is, eating without ritually washing their hands. Now, I don't want to get in trouble with the parents in the congregation – this is not about washing your hands to get rid of germs before eating. Washing your hands, often and well, during the flu season or anytime, is very important! The washing being talked about here is a ritual cleansing and it had become the custom among Judeans of the period to ritually cleanse themselves before eating. Now, there were many practices of Judeans at the time that helped to preserve their identity by making them distinctively different from the people around them. And in these centuries of exile and dispersion, these practices have continued

to support the Jewish identity in lands spread across the world. This is no small achievement.

But there is a clue to the reading that is hidden in plain sight. What does defiled mean? It isn't so much "dirty," or "sinful," as it is "common," hands just like everyone else's hands. Our hands, say the Pharisees, are supposed to be special. But, Jesus is asking, "***Why*** are your hands supposed to be special? Your hands are special because they are really God's hands, doing God's work." If your hands have become too special to do God's work, well, then you've missed the point.

What I think Jesus is saying here is that if we get so caught up in our distinctiveness, in how we are different, how we worship differently from other people that we forget ***who*** we worship and ***why*** we worship and ***what*** the God we worship wants us to do and to be, when we get so hung up on how special we are that we forget what God has set us aside to ***do***, then we are missing the point. We are set aside, we are held apart, we are special because we have a particular task, to reclaim and reform and renew God's world for God's purposes.

If we were here just in order to go to heaven, why would we be ***here*** in the first place? If God's only aim were to get us to heaven this seems like a very roundabout journey. After last week's sermon I had one of my favorite parishioners come to me and say, "You know when you talked about the 'worst of all,' about people who just can't care any more, that was me. But I'm caught. If I think about all the misery in the world, I feel awful. But if I don't care about it, I'm a sinner. So, what's the point?"

I'm reading a book that Bob Finlayson recommended to me, called "They Like Jesus, But Not the Church," by Dan Kimball and it's a real indictment of modern religion. It talks about why young people can be so enthusiastic about Jesus and the ideal of a Godly life

but have no use for religion and what goes on in our churches. And I confess that there are parts in the book where I get uncomfortable, and I think that's the idea. When our religion becomes a kind of a dance, a way to show how we're different from other people and to celebrate our salvation for no other purpose, we ought to be uncomfortable.

The point is that we are set aside, we are special and distinctive to be God's people to do God's work. We are not set aside so that we can look into the mirror and admire our salvation. We are set aside because we have a special relationship to the Law – it is ***our*** Law because it comes from our God. And that Law tells us, yes, that we are to be different, to be distinctive, to be ***un***-common, because it is not common to listen rather than speak, it is not common to restrain our anger, it is not common to care for the widow and the orphan. It is counter-cultural to think first of others, it is counter-cultural to be kind, to forgive, to reconcile. People who do these things are different from the mass of humanity, they are the doers of the Word. But the difference is not in ***how*** we worship but ***who*** we worship, not in the words ***we speak*** but in the Word that ***speaks in us***, not in how we ***hear*** but in how we ***listen***. Bridle your tongues but open your hearts. You are set aside for a purpose.

Amen.