

Yr. B, Proper 17
August 29, 2021
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1340 Words

Lessons: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Some of the messiest lives you can imagine are found in Salina, Kansas. The effects of the sordidness and wickedness described in our lesson from the Letter of James appear in this small town of the American heartland. We're not talking about Vegas or New Orleans or San Francisco or anywhere else that the 21st century Scribes and Pharisees love to condemn—you know the ones pretending to be evangelists, but whose good news is *reserved* for the self-imagined pure and righteous.

Some of the messiest lives—lives which need protecting, nurturing, or healing—those lives show up in Salina, Kansas. Sometimes it happens by choice; other times it happens against a raging will to be left alone.

St. Francis Community Services is a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week, *miracle* of the Episcopal Church. It is a multi-faceted ministry serving over thirty thousand people and is dedicated to addressing the needs of families and children through foster and adoptive family support, migration ministries, art and storytelling therapeutic ministries, equine therapy, residential homes for young victims of sex trafficking, summer camps, and vocational support for developmentally disabled adults. (Other than that, they don't do very much.)

Can you imagine how expensive it is to perform all those ministries for all those people? Saving lives does not come cheap. Well, the good people at St. Francis created an endowment to support their manifold ministries. I learned about it in our Washington National Cathedral a number of years ago while attending a conference.

The presenter was an employee of St. Francis, but his *first encounter* was many years earlier when *he* was a troubled adolescent—sent involuntarily to Salina, Kansas. His incredibly valuable life is one of the ones that got saved through this Episcopal Church miracle.

I met this gentleman later in the exhibit hall, and he handed me this apron and a pair of work gloves. The slogan of St. Francis Foundation is a perfect summary of today's lessons. Indeed, it's an excellent summary of the mission of Jesus to which *we* are called. "Pray and *then* get...your...hands...dirty."

I think there are basically four kinds of people in the world, wherever you go. There are those who *look down* on other people, like the scribes and Pharisees of every age. There are those who *are down*—either by their own fault or through no fault of their own—and who need help. There are those who *get down* and get their hands dirty—offering compassion, mercy, and goodness for those who are laid low. And then, there are those who sit back and think, "That's terrible. Somebody ought to do something about that."

You know...the Letter of James almost didn't make it into the bible. There were concerns in the early centuries about his focus on human works. After all, most of St. Paul's letters rail against the idea that our deeds can save us, no matter how much they are in accord with the God's Law. Sixteen centuries later, none other than the great reformer, Martin Luther, described the Letter of James as "an epistle of straw."

I *love* St. Paul's emphatic position on the unconditional grace and mercy of God. I *love* the indefatigable, reforming spirit of Martin Luther. *But I also love the Letter of James.* I love how he calls the question on social and economic injustice, *and* how he calls our hand when we start to think, "Yeah, that's terrible. Somebody ought to do something about that."

James, the brother of our Lord, is clear about what Christians should do: *Pray...and then...get your hands dirty*. See, the idea is that when we open our hearts in prayer...to God's grace *and* to human need, maybe somehow we get provoked to participate directly in God's love project. Maybe we learn to pray...*and then* get our hands dirty.

C.S. Lewis famously put it like this: "I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. *It changes me.*"

Well, I want you to notice how this change can happen for us. We get a clear explanation this morning from the Letter of James. He writes: "*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father...*"

Do you see who gets credit for the gift? The One from whom all blessings flow, our Father in heaven. You and me? We're just the 'middle men (and women),' inspired by God...through prayer...to become generous philanthropists *in the image of God*...real human channels of divine grace.

So, when you get inspired by God to write a generous check that pinches a little bit, we call *that* a 'sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.' It's not a '*convenience* of praise and thanksgiving,' it's a sacrifice! It's inspired from above. It is inspired by prayer—by opening our hearts to *both* God's grace *and* to human need.

See, we don't *need to pray* if we'd rather pay dues or try to calculate our fair share. Those things are *easy to do*. We don't even have to think about it, much less pray about it. But, *every generous act of giving* is (inspired)...*from above*. It is one of the ways that *we pray* and then get our hands dirty.

And when you show up here (or anywhere else) *to serve* in Christ's name...when you get your hands dirty for the glory of God...*that perfect gift* of service...is also (inspired) *from above*. It is not a star in a crown or a notch in a belt or a chip to cash in for eternal salvation. It is *Divine* grace, channeled through *your praying heart* as you open it more fully to the love of Christ *and* to human need.

When we pray...and then get our hands dirty...it is simply a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere, giving thanks to our heavenly Father...*by loving our neighbors* as ourselves.

I want you to see clearly how this works on Sunday morning. In the Holy Eucharist, we are *first* gathered here to pray, but *also* sent out to get our hands dirty. We are *first* gathered here to be hearers of the word; but *also* sent out to become *doers* of the word! It is not an either-or proposition. Following Jesus involves *both* hearing *and* doing, both praying *and* serving.

You don't learn to ride a bike by just *hearing* how it's done. You can't learn to sail a boat by standing on shore, and *hearing all about it*. Likewise, we don't learn the way of Jesus by simply hearing of what *he did* for other people.

We also need *to do* what he did for other people—feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, minister to the sick and those in prison, and welcome the stranger. We get to do more than sit back and wish somebody would do something. We can do better than just *look down* on other people...if we practice... *getting down* to serve those who *are down*, even if we get our hands dirty.

Our Lord's brother writes explicitly about true religion and spirituality. This is what he said. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress..." (in other words, the most vulnerable.) James is challenging us to pray faithfully enough that our hearts become more and more open to God's grace *and* to human need. It is *exactly* what we did this morning in our opening prayer.

I want to dial back and remind you what we prayed for. We prayed for the Author and giver of all good things...(our Father in heaven) to “increase *in us* (this) true religion” and to “nourish us with all of (God’s) goodness” so that we might yield “the fruit of good works through Jesus Christ...”

In other words, we prayed for God to challenge us to become doers of the word, and not hearers only. We’re asking Christ to show us how to pray...and then get our hands dirty.

Amen.

The problem with the scribes and Pharisees is that would not *get down* on the level of regular, hurting, people in order to help them.

- They just *looked down* on other people, as in today's Gospel story.
- They looked down with judgment on Jesus' friends and their dirty hands.
- Other times they looked down like vultures and found legal, immoral ways of exploiting poor widows and orphans.
- Remember what Jesus said,
- "They like to wear long robes, claim the best seats, and say the long prayers..."
- (but) they will receive the greater condemnation" MK 12:38-40

Well, in today's reading, James is sick and tired of seeing these same scribes and Pharisees who drove his brother crazy.

- And so, he wrote explicitly:
- "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:
- to care for orphans and widows in their distress..."
- James is saying, Look—you can't just pray in the Synagogue on Saturday,
- and then *prey upon* the poor and marginalized the other six days of the week.
- The same is true for us. We can't invest an hour on Sunday to pray for ourselves, and then invest in companies which profit by squeezing the poor.

It's all legal; it's just not right—it's *not* religion that is pure and undefiled.

Religion that is pure begins with prayer to our Father in heaven, the giver of every good gift; which should naturally inspire us to become "a kind of first fruits" which bless all of God's children, and particularly the ones with the greatest needs or griefs or pains.

We need to stop thinking of Sunday worship as how we *finish our week*;

- This prayer—the Holy Eucharist—is where you *start your week*!
- This Table is not for solace only, but for strength! (BCP, p.372)
- We come here to get the strength to go out and serve...
- To get down and help those who *are down*.

“*Lord*, when was it (exactly) that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink and saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothes or sick or in prison and visited you?”

- Jesus’ answer is that the miracle happens when we became ‘*doers* of the word.’
- It’s when we pray and *then* get our hands dirty.
- Jesus said, “Just as you did it to the least (the last, the lost, the neglected and rejected); you did it to me. (MT 25:37-40)

One of the things I love about Jesus’ explanation of how to become ‘doers of the word’ is that there is at least one thing on his list that anybody of any age can do.

- Seeking and serving Christ in *all persons* is not too difficult or dangerous to try.
- You are capable of praying, and getting your hands dirty in one way or another.
- You are capable...of being hearers of the word, who also become doers.
- Many of you already are, thanks be to God!

If you are not as physically strong as you used to be

- to get down and serve in ways you may have done in the past;

- it is never too late to get down (metaphorically)
- and become spiritually, emotionally vulnerable enough to listen to someone who needs a compassionate listener...
- not looking down with pity, but face-to-face with empathy.

None of us are such great auditory learners that we can fully grasp the love of God by sitting in a pew and just hearing *what other people did* 2000 years ago.

- We are also kinesthetic learners. We learn *by doing*.