

“Doers of the Word”

September 2, 2018

In the summer of 2017, I backpacked with friends up to the Strawberry Wilderness. We hiked up to Little Strawberry Lake, and camped in a meadow near a magnificent cirque. On Sunday morning, I awoke before everybody else and set my chair out in the meadow for some time with God.

As I looked up on the mountainside, I saw, for the first time in four days, mountain goats walking down the mountainside to get water. I counted one, two, three, nine, ten, finally fourteen of them carefully walking down into the meadow. I woke up my fellow backpackers because I knew they would want to see these mountain friends.

I wouldn’t have seen that spectacular site if I had not set myself in position for it to happen, if I hadn’t done the work to get there. When we were in Kauai recently, four of us hiked into Waimea Canyon to this beautiful waterfall. But I had to do the work to get there. We start our Old Testament readings for the fall next week, but today I’m using the texts from the Revised Common Lectionary. The Letter of James shows us how to set ourselves up for transformation, how to position ourselves for God to use us.

James says that our faith is a gift from God; the question is how do we unwrap the gift and place ourselves in position to grow, how do we place ourselves in position to be transformed. I heard somebody says recently that a vital church is a church where people are being transformed by God, by each other, and by the community. So what does it look like to place ourselves in position to be changed?

Martin Luther didn’t like the Book of James. In fact, he called it an epistle of straw. Remember that Luther was in the Roman Catholic Church that was preaching that you could work your way into God’s grace. Luther said, No, it all starts with God’s grace, not our works. James was apparently writing to a community that was interested in cheap grace: we’re basking in God’s grace, and now we can do whatever we want. Don’t worry about good works.

So James talks about the importance of works. In the next chapter, he says, Let me show you my faith by showing you my works. The point is our works flow out of

our faith. God starts everything; God takes the initiative. Our works are a response to that graciousness.

So here is how our reading from James starts today: (James 1:17-18) “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 fulfilment 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.”

“God gave us birth...” One of the images in Scripture of new life with God is new birth. Jesus says to Nicodemus, You must be born anew. I do believe that every human being is a child of God. That happens at birth. We are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1). What baptism does is it identifies us with the death and resurrection of Christ.

So James says, We are given this gift, and it is so that we can become a kind of *first fruits*. In the Hebrew Bible, the first fruits are what are brought to the temple as a sacrifice. Sometimes a first child was offered to the temple as a kind of first fruit. Samuel is an example. There is a tradition in the Roman Catholic Church that the first son becomes the priest. He is a kind of first fruit. In the New Testament, first fruits are more symbolic. The first fruits are the new things God is doing in creation. Sometimes Paul would talk about the new Christians in a town as the first fruits.

So what does this mean? If we are first fruits, then our lives are dedicated to God’s use. God is doing a new thing in us and through us. It doesn’t mean God isn’t doing good things through other people too. But we are aware that God is using us.

So what does James suggest we do to position ourselves for spiritual service? He continues in verse 19: “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.²¹ 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.”

I like the way Eugene Peterson in The Message paraphrases this: “Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.” Be quick to listen. Some of us find it hard to listen, because we can’t wait to speak ourselves. Sometimes we assume what someone is going to say. I have a terrible

habit of finishing my wife's sentences sometimes, which understandably really frustrates her.

Maybe we're talking with someone who believes differently than we do, and aren't really listening; we just are waiting for a chance to say what we need to say. Listening is a discipline.

The story is told that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was once at a state dinner, and he was greeting people. He was tired that night of smiling at people and saying the same things, so he decided to see if anyone was really listening. So he started to shake hands with people, smiled a really big smile, and said, I murdered my grandmother this morning. People would automatically respond with: How lovely! Or, Just continue your great work! Nobody was listening, or just assuming they knew what he was going to say. Finally a foreign diplomat really heard what he said, and replied, I'm sure she had it coming.

How well do we really listen? I'm a part of a theological accompaniment group. Last year, you might remember, I went to Mexico for a retreat with 32 other people, Oregonians and Mexicans and Peruvians. This year there are 64 of us. Eight of us meet every month for a conversation on Skype. And what we do is write a paper ahead of time about where we see suffering in our lives and in our work settings and in our world.

We break off into groups of two and listen to each other for a half an hour. Then we report back to the larger group what we heard. And in this simple way we are connecting with people we've never met, and we are leading with our ears. We are listening.

Jesus did this so well. He listened to the inner needs of people. James says, Be quick to listen. Then he says, Be slow to speak. We have trouble with this one too. I used to know a pastor who seemed really negative to me. I felt like every time we had a conversation, he would make a comment that put me down. We were at a conference together once, and after hearing a speaker, I said to him on my way out of the room, Wow, that was terrific! This is the first one of these conferences I've been to! And he replied: What took you so long? Zing....Well, we happened to sit near each other over lunch, and I was still smarting from the previous comment. As we talked about a campus meeting coming up, he said, I haven't heard anything about that. I saw my chance to get back at him, and I said, Well, everybody who's anybody has been invited. Zing.

Tit for tat. You get me. I get you. And then what? It continues to escalate? Does that make us more connected with that person? No, of course not. One of the problems with this encounter is that I took his first comment personally. I became offended. When he said, What took you so long, I could just as well have thought, That's more about him than about me.

James says, Be quick to listen, but slow to speak. Run what you're going to say through that filter in the front of your brain. If I respond this way, what will it accomplish? Does my response bring God glory? Can God use it to strengthen this relationship?

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and *slow to anger*. If you have ever cut somebody off in traffic, maybe drove in a way that you regretted, and somebody responded with road rage, you know how scary this can be. Maybe you are the one who responded with rage. There is something deep within us that responds in anger. It is perhaps an evolutionary response to a threat.

James says, Your anger does not produce the righteousness of God. Now James isn't talking about any kind of anger. He is talking about anger that overcomes us, anger that controls us. Jesus got so angry once that he overthrew tables in the temple. But the reason he got angry was his concern that the poor were being trampled by the sacrificial system of the temple. It wasn't all about him.

Being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger demands some discipline. But these are things we can practice. How about some tips for better listening? One is to listen to understand, and not to respond. So often we can't wait to get our turn to talk. No, we're listening to really understand somebody. You might want to ask a question. Tell me more. Or, I'm curious about what you mean by that? Create a sense of acceptance, not judgment. Jesus said, Don't judge, lest you be judged. We don't need to judge people. Jesus told us to love people, including our enemies.

So listen for understanding. Here's a second suggestion: Let them know you're listening through your body language. Lean forward. Nod your head once in a while. Look them in the eye. Sitting there with your arms across your chest probably doesn't look very inviting. That's a pretty closed position. Use your body language to let them know you are listening.

Here's one last suggestion for being quick to listen: Don't listen just to fix somebody's problems. Those of us with a strong masculine side often try this. If

someone tells us a problem, we figure they mean for us to fix it. But our job is not to fix people. Our job is to listen, to care, to say, I'm sorry, that must really hurt. If someone asks for advice, we can offer it.

Lastly, James says, “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.”

Hearers of the word who don't do anything about it are like people who look at themselves in a mirror and then walk away and forget what they look like. James says, When we look into the law of liberty, into God's commandments, and do them, we will be blessed. and others will be blessed.

And then James gives this definition of the faith: “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.

In the Greco-Roman world, widows and orphans didn't have any social standing. Orphans were sold into slavery. Women without a husband lost the status their husbands might have had. And James says, Do you want to show people your faith? Take care of *those* people. Take care of those who get called the least in this world.

One of our members was cleaning out a file this week and came upon this prayer for children, and I want to close with this this morning. If we are doers of the word, and not just hearers, what will change this week? We have been in a debate in our country over families who come north seeking protection and asylum. For a while we had an intentional policy that separated children from their families, but there are still children who have not been reunited with their parents. So I close with this prayer from Ina Hughs, called, *A Prayer for Children*. Let's pray it together-

We pray for children
who sneak popsicles before supper,
who erase holes in math workbooks,

who can never find their shoes.

And we pray, for those

who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers,
who never "counted potatoes,"
who are born in places where we wouldn't be caught dead,
who never go to a movie,
who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children

who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,
Who sleep with the cat and bury goldfish,
Who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money,
Who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink,
Who slurp their soup.

And we pray for those

who never get dessert,
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,
who watch their parents watch them die,
who can't find any bread to steal,
who don't have any rooms to clean up,
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children

who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,
who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,
who like ghost stories,
who shove dirty clothes under the bed,
and never rinse out the tub,
who get visits from the tooth fairy,
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,
who squirm in church or temple and scream in the phone,
whose tears we sometimes laugh at
and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those

whose nightmares come in the daytime,
who will eat anything,
who have never seen a dentist,
who aren't spoiled by anybody,
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,
who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children
who want to be carried
and for those who must,
for those we never give up on
and for those who don't get a second chance.
For those we smother...
and for those who will grab the hand of anybody
kind enough to offer it.

We pray for children. Amen

from *We Pray for Children*, 1995, William Morrow publishers

Yes, we pray for children, but then God asks us: How will you help? Will you be doers of the word? Amen.