

Sermon for Sunday, September 2, 2012 James 1:17-21 "Doers of the Word"

No more bread for you! Seriously, aren't you glad we don't have another passage about the Bread of Life this week? I know I am. But the Gospel once again seems to be about food – in this case, what kind of food you should eat and what kind of food that you should avoid.

But I think we've talked enough about anything food-related for a while, so I'll give you a break. Instead, we are going to turn to an Epistle that doesn't get much attention, the epistle we just heard...that of James.

Now, if you were a Lutheran, you'd not spend ANY time with James' epistle, because Martin Luther thought that it didn't have much to offer. He called it an epistle made of straw, and followed a long line of folks dating all the way back to the early Christian scholar Eusebius, in saying that this epistle really didn't belong in the Christian canon.

But I think there are some surprises for us if we look at James, and this week's passage is rich with them. Before we look closer, though, let's recall how we ended up last week. We talked about metaphor as a way of helping us understand who Jesus is. We also talked about metaphor as a way of understanding how we do what God wants us to do. We shifted from the awareness that God is present to us in a very profound and immediate way, to the urgent need to do something in response to that awareness. It's that human shift from "I get it" to "well, now what?"

And James, this epistle made of straw, is all about the "now what?"

Let's look at where he begins: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above."

Put another way, everything that you do that is generous, that is about helping someone else, that is openhearted without expecting anything in return, is something that comes through you to others because God planted the seed in you to do it. Every good thing you do is not something you came up with out of thin air. God put that capacity for good in you. It is all about the doing.

Now I'd like to believe that I do good things because I'm a wonderful generous good-hearted person, but James says, "well, yes, sort of...but it's really because God made you to be a generous good-hearted person, and God is inspiring you to do this good stuff."

Gee whiz, sort of takes me down a peg, doesn't it? Here I thought it was all from me...but maybe it is really not me, but God working through me in a marvelously subtle way.

James says we are a sort of "first fruits of God's creatures," that we are made by God to be good in this way. Okay, now I feel a little better.

But if I am made by God to be this way, how do I explain the fact that I'm not all good and generous and sweet and holy 24-7?

Hmmm...perhaps because God made me wired to be good, but God also gave me the opportunity to choose to be good, which means that I may slip sometimes and choose to be not so good.

James gets that. He understands that although we may have been created to be the best and brightest of God's creatures, sometimes we take our fabulousness way too seriously, and in those moments we are much less likely to do good for others, and much more likely to do good for ourselves, because, after all, don't we deserve it? I mean, we're pretty fabulous, right?

Yup, except when we're not.

So James stops talking like a theology professor, and starts talking like your least favorite Sunday School teacher, giving out a list of do's and don'ts. Commandments of sort, right?

“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.”

Listen. Don't talk so much. Don't get angry. Stop being wicked. You're not so important. Turn to God's word. That will get you back on track.

And why do we want to do this? So that we are back to being as fabulous as God made us to be.

And what is the fabulousness that God built into us? Being generous and loving to others. Helping others. Fighting for others who cannot fight for themselves.

Being, as James said, doers of the word, not just hearers. Acting on what God has implanted in us as his beloved creatures and has reinforced through Jesus' words.

Now here's where we might get a little confused, because Jesus says over and over again (and the Apostle Paul reiterates it even more sharply in his teachings) that we can't possibly do enough to earn eternal salvation...only Jesus' death on the cross is big enough to save us. It is only by believing that we can be saved.

But James says in no uncertain terms that we should do good works. That doing good works is what God made us for.

Does that mean that we have to do good works to earn eternal life? It seems like a contradiction in terms, since Jesus says that the only way we get into heaven is in believing in him and what his death on the Cross means.

But is it really?

How many of you have gotten a gift of a box of chocolates? There may be a moment when you first open the chocolates that you think, “I'm going to hide this box so nobody else in the house can have one. They're all mine, my present, and no one gets any but ME!” It's tempting to do that, because the chocolates are so good and you love them so much...and then you expend a whole lot of energy on keeping them hidden, never eating them around any other member of your family, or you eat them all at once and you feel pretty queasy. But there may be a different response. You open the chocolates, and you say to the person who gave them to you, “Why don't you have one?” And your gracious and appreciative response, which is a way of saying thank you, is an act of generosity to the giver. Or you save the chocolates, knowing that your sister who has been going through a difficult time could use a lift, and you simply give them to her. And your generosity, the way God wired you to be generous, is a gift from God, channeled through you, to your sister. It's a moment when you pay attention to what God has done in you and told you through Jesus, and you fulfill what God made you to be. You may not be consciously thinking about your act in that way, but that is what is behind it.

Now here's something that is important to note about these moments when we fulfill what God made us to be: they rarely happen in church on Sunday.

And that's alright. Church is the place where we are reminded about what God made us to be.

But the place where we live it out is in our everyday lives on every other day of the week. It is when we share the chocolate in the office, or help a co-worker who is struggling on a project without being asked. It is when we tell someone who has told a joke that demeans another person, "You know, pal, that's just not funny and it's not appropriate. I think you owe our friend here an apology." It is when we tell the cashier that she has shorted herself a dollar, so that she doesn't get into trouble at the end of the day when she has to reconcile the cash in her drawer. It is when we think first about someone other than ourselves.

When we think of it this way, it does something special: it hallows our everyday lives. It makes them holy.

Holiness is suddenly not something that is reserved for an hour or so on Sunday morning. It is every hour of every day...our awareness of each of us being God's most precious creations.

It is that awareness that inspires our acts, that causes us to be "doers of the Word, rather than hearers." As we sense God's love in how he made us, we do things to fulfill our promise not because we are afraid of God, or think we won't get to heaven unless we do enough good deeds, but because the only life that makes sense is a life joyfully responding to that great love. We can't simply sit in the pews and say "yes, I hear, and that's all very nice." We simply must go out and do what we are made to do, in grateful response to the One who created us. We are doers not because we must, but because we cannot NOT be doers in the face of the way we have been blessed.

Doing good deeds is not the same thing as earning your way into heaven. Paul was right. We cannot do anything that would counterbalance Jesus' gift of salvation by his death. But we can celebrate the gift that was given, in the same way we offer a chocolate back to the giver of the box of candies, in appreciation, in thanksgiving, in joy.

How will you act in this coming week to live out what James advises? Is there one place where you might need to listen rather than speak, avoid getting angry, give without expecting anything in return? Is there someone who might need a hand or a smile? Where will you be the fulfillment of what God made you to be?

The gift of living this way when we are not in church might be to bring new meaning to our time when we are together in church: this is the place where we are reminded of who we are, what we are meant to do, how we are loved and forgiven, and how we are energized to go out into the world yet again, and do it all for another week, and another.

In God's eyes, you are a gift. Live like you believe it.

Amen.