

# A Sermon for the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – August 30, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

by David H. Knight, Interim Rector

*Send us your spirit, God, to open our hearts and minds to your word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

*“Every generous act, 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.”*

James 1:17

One of the treasures in the New Testament is the short letter of James. It's one of my favorites among all the letters in the New Testament, and today's passage from the first chapter is a gem. The Letter of James is only four pages long yet it is full of timely advice for all of us. In the very best sense of the word, James gives encouragement to us to live out our faith by what we do as a response to what we say we believe. The assertion that every good gift comes to us from above is an important starting point as we think about how we live out our faith each day. Our human responsibility is connected to God's initiative and God's care for us. God is constantly nurturing us, giving us gifts, providing us with guidance for our lives, often using human gatherings as well as individuals to supply the good things in the lives of others. James, in a very straightforward manner, gives instruction to us about daily life.

James understood human nature, what makes us tick, and he was a keen observer of how people lived each day. He noticed the generous acts of others and gave encouragement. He noticed the small things that people did for one another that so often make a difference. He noticed the generous acts, and the

gestures and the words people used. He knew that small acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life. We hear these words of James from his letter,

*“...be doers of the Word, not merely hearers...*

*religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress...*

*What good is it if you say you have faith, but do not have works... Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead...”*

What James is reminding us is straightforward: Be doers of the word, and not hearers only. The way that you and I live not only speaks of what we believe, it is really the only way to find out if what we believe is true. For James, faith is the way that you and I understand life. Faith is what orders our priorities. Faith is what determines our actions. If faith is action, then action is faith. At the end of the day, you and I either did it or we did not. One can see what we believe by what we really do.

One of the marks of this parish is that in so many ways you people here are indeed doers of the Word. In many quiet, unheralded ways people reach out to one another when a need arises and you offer assistance to one another. I hear these stories again and again as I did just this past week. There are the conversations that take place with those on the margins of our society where on more than one occasion, for example, I have heard of how one of you has reached out to a person on a street corner to have a conversation. More than being simply the recipient of a handout, that person on the street corner became in your eyes the child of God who, in fact, he actually is.

What we believe can very well be inspired by God. That inspiration can come from what we read in the Bible. That inspiration can come through the beauty and power of our worship as found in the Prayer Book and in the hymns we sing, yet all the inspiration we receive must be translated into how we respond to all that inspiration. What we believe becomes evident in our conversations, our actions. It is demonstrated in the use of our checkbooks. Faith is found in the way

we spend our money. It is found in the way you and I allocate our time. Faith is the manner in which we relate to others.

I came across the other day a sermon preached some time ago at the Washington Nation Cathedral by The Rev. Dr. Francis Wade. As I read what he said, I thought, "I wish I'd said that—indeed I shall by sharing with you what he said. First, he quoted a popular preacher's question raised many years ago. It was, "If Christianity were a crime would there be enough evidence to convict you?" That is the question James asks us in a nutshell. Francis Wade then goes on to say, "So let's let the light of (what he calls) the James Test, uncomfortable though it may be, shine on us for a while."

He goes on, "In the awkward, unruly way of public discourse some are wondering if America is or ever was a Christian nation. It is a worthy question in spite of its neglect of other faiths. James would tell us that the answer is not to be found in the minds of the Founders but in the lives of the citizens. He would have us look at how we treat the poor and the broken, and he would wonder how many we made broke and impoverished on the way to our prosperity. James would not care that we built a great cathedral. He would ask what difference it made after it was finished. James would not look to see what was on our minds or even (in) our hearts. Belief in God does not impress him in the least. He would look at our GPS to see where we go and our Facebook page to find out what we did when we got there. James does not care about our hopes for the future or our view of the past. He looks only at our stewardship of the present. James says all of that adds up to what we really believe. If we take the James Test, the results need not be shared with others because people around us already know how we act and what we do." \* I found Dr. Wade's description of how James would see us as individuals, as a church, and as a nation to be helpful even if a bit unsettling.

Our faith, you see, is something that we do as a result of what we believe. The way to know if our faith has any substance at all is to do it and see. There is no way, for us to prove that Jesus rose from the dead, but when you and I live as if He did rise from the dead and is the Son of God and the Lord of our lives, and as if our life on this side of the Great Divide and the Hereafter draws its meaning from

Him, then the question of the resurrection goes away. James is very clear that the way you and I live not only reveals what you and I believe, it is the only way for us to find out if what we believe is true.

In this coming week, there will be opportunities once again for us to live what we believe. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, from the Father of lights.” What will what we do and say, how we use our time, how we use our checkbooks, how we respond to the needs of others—how will all of that reveal our faith in God’s gifts to us? May the encouragement of James to be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers inspire us as followers of Jesus Christ. May our faith be for us a source of joy and purpose in some way as we live out each day. May you and I be doers of the Word and not merely hearers only.

*Send us your spirit, God, to open our hearts and minds to your word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

\*from a sermon preached on September 2, 2012 at the Washington National Cathedral by The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade