

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
James 1:22-27: "Do You Walk the Walk?"
May 16/17, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

+ + +

Lord, You work in us both to will and to do according to Your good pleasure. Prompt us to do what You say. Let it be our endeavor to live according to Your Word and always to do what pleases You. Give us love in our heart, and let holiness adorn us in our every word and deed. Amen. (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 344)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the first chapter of the Epistle of St. James. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. / If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose Word is truth and whose Way is salvation, dear fellow redeemed:

For many in our society, "religion" has become a dirty word. When they hear this word, they think about things like restriction, corruption, abuse of power, rules, and judgment. They do not like "religion," but they do like the sound of "spirituality." This has led many today to speak of themselves as "spiritual but not religious." What this typically means is that they reject church-going, since that is "organized religion." They prefer to meet God on their own terms. They think it is important to think about God, but how you think about God is up to you. The so-called "spiritual" person imagines that he is closer to God in nature or even on his living room sofa than he could ever be in a church building.

To a certain extent we can understand the misgivings about "religion." We cannot deny that much harm has been done to people within organized religion. Some church leaders have abused their power and their trust. They have failed to warn the unrepentant and to comfort the hurting. Some church members have engaged in grudges, personal attacks, and mud-slinging and have hardly looked like the people that God has called them to be.

The self-proclaimed "spiritual" are glad to avoid that scene. They aren't about to have anyone tell them what to believe or what to do. They don't need a "middle man" —they can just go directly to God. But who is this god? Many in the "spiritual but not religious" category describe

him as a god of love, a god who supports them, who is always there when they need him. He does not judge them but gives them room to make their own choices. He is a god who cares more about their feelings than their faith—how they feel about themselves, how they feel about others, and how they feel about him. In other words, this god is a god of their own making, which is ironic since they reject “religion” as being man-made.

It is true that there are many man-made religions in the world. “Religion” is a rather broad term. One definition describes it as: “The outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service, and honor are due” (Webster’s 1913 Dictionary). One could argue that every person has a religion—a set of beliefs about the universe and their place in it. But not all religious beliefs are the same and not all are good and true.

We follow the Christian religion, which is based on the Bible. Christianity is like other religions of the world in that it teaches about God and sets down laws to follow. But in its central teaching, Christianity could not be any more different. The religions of the world outline what we must do to hopefully get right with God. Christianity is about how God made things right with us by sending His only Son to suffer and die in our place.

This is why you are a Christian. You know you are a sinner, and that no matter how hard you try, you cannot make things right with God. You know that you deserve eternal punishment in hell for your sins. But you also know that all your sins are forgiven because Jesus paid for them in full on the cross. You know that all the blemishes and stains of your past are completely covered by the righteousness of Jesus. You know that eternal life in heaven is yours by faith in Him. No other religion offers such comfort and peace with God.

The good news of Christianity is also the power source for living a godly life. As we hear the Word of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is at work in us strengthening our faith and sanctifying us, so that the love of God shines through us into the world. The devil does not want the world to know God’s love, so he works to make our love grow cold. He tempts us to become complacent about hearing and learning the Word, to let down our guard, to focus on how others should serve us instead of how we can serve them.

This can happen even to those who regularly partake of the means of grace like you are here today. Even though you hear God’s Word and receive His Sacraments, you can become comfortable doing what God tells you not to do. You can ignore the needs of the people around you. You can become resentful when your needs are not met. You can give free rein to thoughts of hatred, jealousy, lust, and pride. And all of this while still considering yourself a “good Christian.”

This is why the inspired writer of today’s text urges believers in Christ to “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only.*” God has called us out of the darkness of unbelief to the light of His truth and salvation. Through Holy Baptism, He joined us with our Savior Jesus, so that we now “*walk in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:4). We are not what we used to be. We are not of the world. We are born of God.

There are plenty of people who give organized religion a bad name. We want to give it a good name. But how? *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”* Christians have set themselves apart throughout history by the way they have treated the lonely, the weak, and the hurting. They have often led the way in medical care, education, and social services. They have sacrificed their own ambitions and put their own lives at risk in service to others.

This is what God calls us to do as His children. He calls us to dedicate ourselves fully to love for others, to live humble and honorable lives that lead others to know the hope we have in Christ. What better time could there be to share this hope than now? The world is consumed by fear about what the future will hold. “Will I or my loved ones get sick? Will I have enough money to buy what I need? Will the economy rebound?” And then there is the constant bickering and name-calling among those who are convinced their political party is guided by angels while the other is steered by demons.

What do we have to fear since Jesus has defeated sin, death, and devil for us? And why would we put our hopes in men when our Lord and Savior rules over all things at the Father’s right hand? This courage and confidence we have in Christ is what we want all people to have. We want them to know God is filled with abundant grace and mercy toward them. He does not count their sins against them anymore because Jesus died in their place and rose again from the dead. He will come again on the last day to take all who trust in Him to heaven.

This is no man-made religion. These are no empty words. These are the words of salvation and life that God has given us by His grace. But the people of the world will not listen to these words unless we take them seriously. They don’t just want to hear us “talk the talk,” they want to see us “walk the walk.” You can tell them that you go to church every week. But if the way you live your life is no different than the way unbelievers live their lives, why should they take your words seriously?

But “walking the walk” is not easy. People do not appreciate their bad behavior being magnified by your good behavior. It’s easier on their conscience if you join them in evil. And then there is the constant struggle inside ourselves between the desires of our flesh and the desires of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). It is hard to keep the sinful nature restrained.

Thanks be to God we are not on our own in trying to do what is right! Unlike the misguided people who think they can find God by their own efforts or thoughts, we know that we cannot go to Him. Our sin keeps us from even getting close. But He gladly comes to us. He comes to us through the Word and Sacraments which we partake of in this place. He comes to forgive us for our failure to confess Him by our words and our actions. And He comes to strengthen us for continued service in His kingdom.

This is how your “doing” as a Christian is always connected to your “hearing” of God’s Word. As you hear the powerful Word with a humble and faithful heart, the Holy Spirit is working to put your faith in action. He is the one who produces good works, good words, and good thoughts toward others. It is by His power that you look to serve others instead of just yourself, that you speak what is kind instead of what is hurtful, that you are guarded from the temptations and forces that would ruin your faith.

It is only by His power that you are able to *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”* (Mat. 5:44), as Jesus calls you to do. One of the most important ways for you to be a doer of the word and not a hearer only, is through prayer. Much *“doing”* is done by prayer, because prayer brings a difficult situation or a need to the all-powerful God, the One for whom nothing is impossible.

You are not on your own as you *“walk the walk”* of a godly life. You have the encouragement of your brothers and sisters in Christ as they walk alongside of you. And you have the assurance that Jesus is leading the way. He walked before you to the cross and the grave before rising to life again. And he still walks before you to guide you on the paths of righteousness until you join Him in His heavenly kingdom.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

+ + +