

This fresh and beautiful morning, as we worship in our lovely Garden, I invite you to consider the words of our lesson from James for just a few moments. As we do so, I'm a little relieved that the founder of our denomination, Martin Luther, isn't present. Luther disliked this particular book of Scripture. He thought it should be removed from the Biblical canon. He referred to it as a "book of straw." The reason Luther disliked James, is that it is primarily a book of down-to-earth, practical advice on living the Christian life. Which are exactly the reason that I and many others, like it! But, Luther believed that James lacked a well-defined theology of grace, and that James put too much emphasis on what *we* do, rather than on what *God does for us*. Luther was all about grace. Nevertheless, in the face of Martin's potential disapproval, we reflect this morning on these verses from James.

And the first words we find in our text, James 1:17, are words that even Luther could love. Not only are they grace-drenched, but they are surprisingly poetic for the practical James. "Ever generous act of giving, every perfect gift is from above...from the Father of lights, with whom there is no shadow due to change." You might have heard music in your minds as I read that verse. The song, "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above" comes from these verses. It's been set to an older hymn tune and also to more contemporary music in the musical Godspell. You might also hear the first line of the hymn we'll soon be singing, Great is Thy Faithfulness. "Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father, there is no shadow of turning in thee...thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not, as thou hast been, thou forever will be." The poetic quality of these lines from James captured the attention of song writers. They capture our attention, too, and they are all about a gracious God, a God who gives every blessing we experience, a God whom James calls "the Father of lights". Just in that simple description of God there is room for poetry. Particularly as we hear those words while sitting outside, I have to wonder-- what kind of lights did James have in mind? The God of sunlight? It's blazing brightly right now. The God of moonlight? Think of the many times we've seen the reflection of the moon's light on the waters of our Lake when it's still on an evening. Or did James have in mind starlight, meteor showers, fire-fly light? Maybe James thought of the God of fire-light---how many fires have been lit this

summer? Maybe he thought of the God of oil lamp light, of candle-light. Maybe we---2000 years later and dwellers closer to the North Pole---might also think of the God of northern lights, or light from the lighthouses along our North Shore, or of electric light, or of the speed of light. It is this God, this “Father of Lights” who gives us every good gift we have, from the love of our families, to the sweetness of wild blueberries, to the warmth of our homes, to the marvelous workings of our bodies, to the special gifts we each possess. This Father of starlight and firefly light is inextricably bound into the fabric of your self and the daily routines of your life. These are grace-drenched words, and we can imagine Martin smiling approvingly.

But his smile may begin to waver as move onto verse 19. For here, James, having established to his satisfaction, that God is gracious, moves into the “so what?” portion of our lesson. The “so what” is always what grabbed the attention of the practical James. God is a God of giving and grace, he says. So what? Well, here’s the answer to so what—so you, as a child of this glorious Father of lights, ought to live in this way. And he tells us how. His words are worth considering.

James begins his advice with these words: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak.” So in some things we are to be quick, while in other things we are to be slow. The action he urges us towards speed in is that of listening. James tells us to be good listeners. His emphasis on this particular quality is really quite interesting. Think of how many spend good money for counselors and therapists, sometimes mostly to find a good listener. Are they that hard to find? A good listener shouldn’t be that rare. According to James, every child of God, every follower of Jesus, should be a good listener. When I monitor my conversational habits, I tend to discover some bad ones---I’m too quick to talk, and I’m too quick to pay only partial attention when others are speaking. You might try monitoring your habits; are you quick to listen? Good listening is to be a hallmark of a *Christian* lifestyle. Who knew?

And the next piece of advice follows from the first. We are to be quick to listen, because we are to be *slow* to speak. Listening more means speaking less. Do the math. For a lot of us, that is a steep challenge. Many of us love to talk, we love to hear ourselves talk. Certainly pastors, among others, are prone to this fault.

How many times are pastors asked by someone to “say a few words” at some occasion? Rare is the pastor who can actually say “just a few words”!

This following story is told of one Pastor who knew that being slow to speak is sometimes the strongest way to communicate:

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for his pastor’s visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination.

As the one lone ember’s flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and “dead as a doornail.”

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting.

Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, “Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday.”

This story is a reminder that what we do, how we listen, the quality of our silence, may speak more loudly than all our words. Be quick to listen and slow to speak, James tells us. In our noisy culture, that should be a visible and audible difference among the followers of Christ! We should actually stand out for not always talking and standing out, but rather for being good listeners.

And in fact, James most definitely *wants* us to *visibly* be Christians in many ways, in the best possible sense. Our faith *should show* in what we do. “Be doers of the word and not hearers only,” James writes in his most famous verse, later on in our reading. He wants theory and practice to come together and be *observable*. Like in sports or music; it may be important to understand the concept behind how to sing or how to hit the golf ball, but what really matters is bringing the theory into practice—singing the song, hitting that dang golf ball. It’s not enough to theologize about Christianity. It’s not enough to hear about Jesus; we have to *be* Jesus for others. By being quick to listen, slow to speak, and by what we *do*.

Thinking about *doing* ties in with Labor Day weekend, to my mind. This is maybe the one weekend of the year when we give much intentional thought to the value of work and the respect that is due to workers. I’m not referring only to work for which we get paid, but to work that we do sheerly for love and for service. It is through our work, both paid and unpaid, that we are *do-ers* of our faith and not hearers only, that we make a difference in the world. Regardless of what our work may be, it is a means of expressing our faith through being a do-er. Not that we have to make everything we do, our work, into some kind of *overtly religious* expression; that would be hugely awkward for we self-effacing Midwesterners, wouldn’t it? But even Luther in the 16th C stated that you don’t live out your Christian faith as a shoemaker by putting a cross on every shoe, but by making good quality shoes and charging fairly. Whatever work we do, if we do it well and honestly, honors God and turns us into a do-er, not just a hearer of God’s word.

As Labor Day reminds us, work is valuable. Not merely for providing a salary, although that is certainly of value. But work often provides us with a sense of camaraderie with fellow workers, a sense of responsibility that keeps us sharp, a sense of self-esteem in contributing to the common good. Working and doing any kind of job honestly and well brings worth and dignity into our lives. As all of *you* know well, because whether or not you are employed for money, so many of you provide countless volunteer hours to our church and our community, and those hours make such a tremendous difference in the lives of others. That’s why we honor those who labor, whether for pay or for love or for a desire to serve others. It’s a way to be a do-er and contribute to the fabric of church, village, society in ways that reflect our commitment to Christ, even if they are

not *overtly* religious. And as James writes, “those who are doers and act—they will be blessed in their doing”.

And so we are. Doing good is good for us and blesses us, so it’s a win-win situation.

This Labor Day weekend not only holds up the value of work for us; it also marks an unofficial beginning of the transition from summer to autumn, from vacation time to school time, from colorful wild flowers and butterflies to colorful leaves. For many of us, it is our favorite time of year. I hope we might enter this time with a renewed appreciation for being doers and not merely hearers of God’s word, and for being slow to speak and quick to listen. I also hope we might be alert and appreciative of all the ways that the Father of Lights blesses us with light and with every good gift. As we’re about to sing, “Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.” Amen.