

Sermon - Proper 18, Year B
James 2
9/8/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was growing up, there was a woman who attended our church who drove a massive, exceptionally well-cared-for 1984 Buick LaSabre. The car was impressive, but the very best part was her license plates. Every single year, this lady chose a new personalized license plate for the LaSabre. These are some of the plates I remember: “LVJSUS” “JESUS12” “JN316” and my favorite: “HLYRLR.” I didn’t know this woman very well, but at some point, I asked her about the license plates. Was there some sort of personal significance? What was her inspiration behind this? “Oh, honey,” she told me. “I’m just trying to stop myself from driving like an **** in the Lord’s name.”

The Holy Spirit surely surprised me as this memory returned to me this week as I spent some time with the Letter of James. The authorship of this letter is attributed to James the Just, known in the Bible as the brother of Jesus – perhaps a cousin or some other close relative. He is writing this letter of discipleship and instruction to Christians who were primarily coming from a Jewish background who were scattered beyond the lands of Israel. He reminds them that even though they may be far from Jerusalem – even though they may be strangers in a strange land — they must remember what it means to follow Christ. They must hold fast to the substance of their faith. And they must remember that they are prayed for, supported, and loved. It is a letter of discipline, but it is also a letter of great encouragement.

This letter of James was quite controversial in the early days of the Christian Church and this controversy has popped up every so often throughout the centuries as the Church reckons with what it actually says. Christianity was actively, often brutally persecuted throughout the

Roman Empire until the year 313 AD when Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan and began to convert the holdings of Rome into Christian territories. It did not take long for Christianity to become the religion of the authorities and the elite. Christianity was the default condition of the comfortable, those who were quite content to believe in Jesus and think about the Holy Spirit and to hear sermons about faithfulness, but were also quite content to keep the old systems of social hierarchy firmly in place. Everybody is fine being told to love their neighbor until that neighbor is a pagan. Or a tiresome widow. Or a prostitute. Or a slave.

Several early Christian scholars in fact wanted to leave this letter of James out of the Bible. It was dangerous. Because at the heart of the Epistle of James is the ultimate question: **if your faith doesn't change your life and the way you live, then what good is it?**

This is a fundamentally upsetting sort of question. If we follow Jesus but we do not take his teachings seriously, then what, really, are we up to? If we attend church on Sunday and then tear out of the parking lot driving like a ****, then what, really, are we up to? This is perhaps a silly example, but there is a profound spiritual truth here. James insists that faith *matters*. It is not just about what we believe, but also about how we inhabit those beliefs and make them known in the broader world.

I do want to make a quick but important distinction. In the fourth century, there was a wayward teacher named Pelagius who taught that human beings needed to accomplish works in order to be saved. He argued that God's favor came exclusively from our merit and our actions. This was one of the early Church's great heresies, and it is false. This idea is not found in scripture. James, in his letter, is not making this claim. What James is emphasizing here is that the gift of faith in Jesus Christ is so complete and so transformative – so lifegiving – that the internal grace we receive is meant to thoroughly change who we are. It is meant to inform every

single thing that we do. Of course we will stumble – of course we will struggle sometimes to love others and to quiet the louder clamoring of our selfishness. But by the grace of the Holy Spirit, our faith – if we let it – **will make us new.**

Our faith is not meant to be kept to ourselves. This fresh, enlivening faith insists that it be shared. **If your faith doesn't change your life and the way you live, then what good is it?** “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

This good work *can* begin immediately. Start small. Instead of picking up my phone first thing in the morning, I can leave it aside, and I can pray. When I sit down to begin the day's work, I can ask God to guide my hours and my judgment. When there is something I don't care to do or something very difficult to do, I can invite God to sit vigil there, trusting that even my inconvenience or my pain is something that can teach me about holiness. When I see someone I might not understand or whom I struggle to love, I can ask that God help me to see that person as Jesus sees them. I can begin to look at how I use my time and my finances – what do I have that should belong to someone else? Why am I afraid to give it away? Where have I excused myself from being selfish or irritable, or blind to the very real needs of others?

When we start asking these questions, the answers might seem a little unsettling. It might feel like suddenly walking around with a massive personalized license plate upon our chests, stopping us from reckless living as we tear out of the parish parking lot. But remember that the Letter of James, while sometimes controversial, is ultimately a letter of great encouragement. The teachings of Jesus are sometimes difficult, but they are in fact the only thing that shows us who we truly are – who we are truly meant to become: holy, faithful, joyful, and free. Ask him, and he will show you the way. Amen!