

AN EPISTLE OF STRAW
The News from Indian Lake
09.08.24 James 2:14-17
Dean Feldmeyer

Martin Luther called the Epistle of James an “epistle of straw.” Kinda harsh, if you ask me.

See, Luther had staked his life on the power and effectiveness of God’s grace, unearned, undeserved, unconditional. And so focused was he on that grace that any hint of works righteousness, the notion that we can earn our way into heaven, was abhorrent to him.

When he read James’s letter, that’s what he saw: works righteousness.

But I think his theological myopia may have done him a disservice. It made it impossible for him to hear the full measure of the challenge that James puts forth for the early church and for us, today.

GRACE & GOOD WORKS

Apparently, rich people would show up at the worship services – usually held in someone’s home, around a meal table – and they would immediately be ushered to the head of the table. People who had power and status in the world were given power and status in the church while the poor were shunted aside.

This, for James, was the very opposite of what it meant to live by God’s grace.

James believed that if we claim to live by grace, we should be able to show some evidence to validate that claim. Currying favor with the rich was not the kind of evidence he was looking for.

He goes on, then, to demonstrate how the wealthy people of his time and place showed not grace but actual disdain for the poor. God’s law, he says, calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

“But,” responds the debater, “It is my faith in God’s grace that saves me so I have no need to do good deeds.”

James responds: But that’s an inauthentic, empty, dead faith. True faith produces evidence of salvation. It is not enough to say, ‘I am saved.’ A person who is truly saved by God’s grace seeks, indeed runs to show evidence of that salvation through acts of love and charity.”

And then he offers that famous theological aphorism: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Sorry, Martin. James is right on this one. Good works, how we treat the poor and the desperate people among us, doesn’t save us but it is the evidence of our salvation and that tension is constantly being demonstrated in God’s people, even God’s people at Indian Lake.

THE TORNADO

It has not been a quiet year at Indian Lake.

You may recall that on March 14, an EF4 tornado hit the Indian Lake area and cut a wide swath of destruction in and around the two communities on the north and west sides of the lake, Lakeview and Russell's Point.

We didn't know until sometime later that 2 people in Lakeview were killed in the Geiger Trailer Park, a small park of about 30 or so mobile homes nearly all of which were severely damaged or destroyed. A third died on Orchard Island which sits on the lake just out from Russell's point, connected only by a thin driveway about ¼ mile long. Another 26 were injured.

The other areas to be heavily damaged included Old Campground, an area in Russell's point that used to be a campground with rental cabins for tourists but, today, is made up mostly of small houses and cottages that were originally intended for vacationers but are now largely occupied by low income renters.

The Flats, an equally low-income neighborhood in Lakeview was also hard hit.

The Indian Lake library was a total loss. And despite initial reports of total devastation, the donut shop in Russell's point was only slightly damaged – some shingles and siding lost.

The two Mexican restaurants, La Playa Azul (The Blue Beach) and El Cazador (The Hunter) both lost their roofs. El Cazador in Russell's Point was repaired and back in business by mid-April, La Playa Azul in Lakeview reopened just before Labor Day.

The three nursing homes came through pretty much unscathed losing only some shingles and some patio furniture that disappeared completely, probably into the lake.

The library was a total loss but reopened in another building with the donation of 1200 children's books from the children of the Upper Arlington (Columbus). The only problem is that no one is quite sure what building it reopened in. Some thought it was one of the churches, others thought it was in the Masonic hall but, as of Memorial Day, no one had found it, yet.

Lakeview Community Church would have probably lost its steeple, folks say, had it not been knocked down by another storm about 25 years ago and never replaced. The trustees have been gloating about how forward looking they were to not to replace that steeple.

Probably the biggest shake up in the business community came from Dave's IGA and True Value Hardware which received some heavy damage, especially to the roof of the building...but we'll get to that in a minute.

First...

FELDY-PALOOZA

For about ten years, now, the Annual Feldmeyer Family Reunion has been affectionally known as Feldy-palooza. It is always held on the weekend of July 4 and, for the past 4 years it has been held at Indian Lake where Ben and Brian own 3 houses about a block from each other.

This year was no exception. Jean and I arrived on Thursday, the 4th, and spent the day relaxing and celebrating with Brian and Teresa and their four kids and three grandkids.

Brian's house is big enough with enough bedrooms to hold all of us which was a blessing. But, as with many blessings, there was a down side in that the television room was just outside the bedroom that Jean and I shared and we got to wake up every morning to the sounds of a kids' show called "Bluey."

The rest of the family trickled in about 55 strong including a few friends who didn't have anywhere to go for the holiday so they were invited to become part of our family just for the weekend. Brian's house was pretty much full so some stayed with Ben and Gretchen at one of their two houses. Lisa and DJ pulled their camper into Brian's back yard and some of the teenagers set up tents on the other side of the fire pit. The food flowed in plenteous supply with a pretty much constant potluck smorgasbord going on 20 hours a day. There was a 9-hole golf tournament at Cherokee Hills Golf Course, a cornhole tournament, a fishing tournament, and lots of just sitting around talking and storytelling.

We were going to have a family jam session and sing along around the campfire but The Cranberry Resort, a bar and grill with a boat dock and outside dining sits about 200 yards from Brian's house and was touting a live band for every night of the holiday weekend and they were playing so loudly that they could be heard clear across the lake in Huntsville.

Noise complaints were lodged by various residents but violators of the noise ordinance have to be given one warning with at least 90 minutes to comply. Well, by the time the dispatcher reached Police Chief Ed Laudermilk with the reported complaint and Ed dispatched officer John Murtaugh to the scene of the crime it was nearly 11pm and the band was already scheduled to stop playing by midnight so the whole thing became a kind of game that they played every night.

The Indian Lake Guns and Edged Weapons Club chipped in with the Sons of the Great Conflict Civil War Re-enactors club and the Lions and Kiwanis to finance "Smoke on the Water" a fireworks show over the lake originally scheduled for Thursday night, the 4th, but all the fireworks companies were busy providing incendiary entertainment for larger, richer communities on that night and, many of them on Friday as well, so "Smoke on the Water" moved to Saturday night, the 6th. Usually, the show lasts about 15 minutes with only 20 or so fireworks but the mood was up and everyone wanted to celebrate the area's recovery from the tornado so they paid for about 35 fireworks, enough to fill 20 minutes, 25 if they stretched the pauses between launches.

A TALE OF TWO TOWNS

Saturday morning's brunch buffet was supposed to include donuts from the donut shop in Russell's Point and my brother, Ben, informed me that, if we wanted some of their apple fritters, we'd have to get to the donut shop no later than 8:00AM. So, Jean and I already being awake, thanks to Bluey and company, volunteered to drive over and pick up the donuts that were already paid for by our nephew, Adam.

Ben accompanied us and we headed over there, first to drop off our order at the donut shop, then to pick up some ice and other necessities at Dave's IGA, then back to the donut shop to make the pick-up and back to the house. No problem.

This trip took us first through Russell's Point which was already open and busy at 8:00 AM looking for all the world as though no tornado had ever been through the place. Then we came to Lakeview where we found Dave's Food and True Value Hardware, formerly Dave's IGA and True Value Hardware. The name change, we were told, happened because Dave could no longer meet the demands that were required by the Independent Grocers of America (IGA) due to the tornado damage and, apparently, had no timeline for getting the damage repaired.

Four months after the tornado, 2/3 of the roof was still covered by a blue, plastic tarp. Produce was being sold out of boxes stacked on the sidewalk in front of the store because the coolers still weren't working. The large sign in front of the store was still bent like a hairpin and new sign made of a hand painted sheet of plywood was leaned against it.

And Dave's lack of recovery was emblematic of the rest of the town. Everywhere we looked there were blue, plastic tarps, boarded up windows, overgrown lawns, cars still sitting on their roofs, and trash blowing up against fences. It was a mess.

Ben explained that this was because the recovery money that had been promised from the state and federal government had not been distributed by the city council. And the reason it hadn't been distributed was that they couldn't agree on how best to distribute it.

See, Russell's Point had taken the money and, immediately, started spending it, distributing it to those in need who had only to show up at the community building with an estimate or a bill from one of the many legitimate recovery companies who had shown up after the tornado and a check would be cut within 24 hours. It didn't matter what part of town or what kind of abode you lived in. Big, luxurious house, modest little house, cottage, mobile home or, in a couple of cases, campers because their home was completely gone. If you showed up with a legitimate estimate, you got a check.

Their goal was to get the trash picked up and hauled away, the residents back into their homes, and the businesses back open and running as quickly as possible, hopefully before the influx of tourists who were expected for the solar eclipse which was supposed to be especially visible from Indian Lake, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and certainly by Labor Day. The eclipse had been a tight one, coming just a month after the tornado, but all the trash had

been hauled away by Memorial Day and, by Independence Day, the town looked cleaned up and open for business, some buildings looking even better than they did before the storm due to hundreds of gallons of paint that had been donated by the Porter Paint company.

The only sad note was that The Wedge, a family-owned store that sold gifts, crafts, and souvenirs had closed up shop and sold their inventory to the Walgreen drug store, but most say that this was inevitable as the owners were getting old and their kids and grandkids weren't interested in keeping the store going.

On the bright side, however, the old Tinsley's IGA building that had been sitting empty since Dave bought them out five years ago, was purchased by Family Dollar stores and was in the process of turning it into the largest Family Dollar store in the state. A net gain for the community.

Lakeview was a different story, however.

According to Ben, a couple members of council got a bright idea that a careful and detailed study should be undertaken to determine how the relief funds could be best and most effectively spent. It was well known that most of the folks who owned homes in the Geiger Trailer Park or the Flats did not have sufficient insurance to replace what was lost and many of them were renters whose landlords were under insured as well. If they took long enough doing the "careful and detailed study" most of the residents of those two areas would not be able to wait for the recovery money and would be evicted and leave, some abandoning their property, and others offering to sell at well below market value.

These properties, close as they were to the lake itself, were vastly undervalued and, once the current residents or owners left. They could be sold to developers who would build highly valuable homes on them, homes that would increase the tax revenues of the city, county, and school district.

And if all of that failed, city council could simply seize the properties via the doctrine of eminent domain, arguing that doing so would benefit and improve the property values of everyone else in the community, a tactic that had worked in Norwood, Ohio.

So, council agreed. They decided to pay a large sum from the recovery money to a firm from Columbus who would come and do a study as to what should be done about the Flats and Geiger Trailer Park. And, in the meantime, nothing had been done. No recovery efforts had been undertaken save the ones mounted by the residents themselves, using rakes and wheelbarrows, and the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts on Saturdays.

This was all so distressing that I had to have a donut and a cup of coffee. We sat in the car and munched and slurped for awhile and, finally, I said: "So the city council is going to stall until the poor folks who live there can't wait any longer and leave and then they'll seize the property and sell it to one of a few hand-picked contractors who will turn it into half million-dollar homes that will bring in tax revenue."

Ben nodded. "Million-dollar homes in some cases. Especially if they're right on the water. Only there is a glimmer of hope. Some of those poor residents have banded together and hired a lawyer."

A LIVING FAITH

And so, we return to the Epistle of James, whence we began.

Ben assures me that the people of Lakeview are basically good, kind, generous folks. Most of them go to church on Sundays. They belong to civic clubs and organizations with the hope of improving their community and their world. They volunteer at the Fourth of July hoopla and the Memorial Day parade of boats. They help raise money for charity.

And their intentions are good. They want to improve their community. Replacing near derelict trailers and falling-down cottages with million-dollar homes will not just improve the look of the place. The property taxes will go a long way toward improving the schools, the parks, and the community in general.

But at what cost? And who's paying it. What will happen to those who will be displaced from their homes? Where will they go? How will they raise the money to pay the security deposit on a rental house or apartment in Bellefontaine or Wapakoneta?

Let us pray that, in their prayer groups or Bible study groups they will come across the passage we heard read this morning.

"What good is it if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can 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? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

Let us go forth from here, brothers and sisters, with living faith.

Amen.

