

Proper 17, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B - September 1, 2024

“We Are Doers of the Word”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SOUTH BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 | Psalm 15 | James 1:17-27 | Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

My family laid Mom to rest last Wednesday. Some of her kids and grandkids returned to her that evening as the sunset and drew a huge heart in the silky dirt above her then set flowers in it. When I sat down to work on this sermon, I decided that she would want me to get back to doing Gospel work. I found a magazine on Mom’s desk at home about children’s health opened to an article entitled, “How do we want to be remembered?” She would want to be remembered for the many ways she helped children. She traveled into Boston’s poorest neighborhoods to check in with families on home visits. She reminded me in some ways of Dorothy Day whose faith and keen awareness of God’s many blessings moved her to serve those in need.

Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Workers Movement, in which hundreds of communities were established for people to serve the poor. In the monastic tradition, communities tend to order themselves around a “rule” or “rule of life.” The only rule Dorothy lived by was the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew Ch. 25 (you know it: “...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”).

By the end of her life, Dorothy had learned a lot about life in community: “The older I get, the more I meet people, the more convinced I am that we must only work on ourselves, to grow in grace. The only thing we can do about people is to love them.” Her letter echoes the advice we heard in James’ letter in the first reading today in which he urged Jewish Christians to work on themselves and to love. They could work on themselves by being “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...” and by loving they would be “doers of the Word, not merely hearers...”

Again from James: “The hearers who deceive themselves are like those who look at themselves in a mirror, then on going away, immediately forget what they were like.” Scripture has the same effect as looking in a mirror. When we hear James’ advice to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...” we recall all the times we have fallen short and missed opportunities to love.

Last week at St. Paul's, I reflected on Paul's advice to the Ephesians. Paul told these faith communities to put on the whole armor of God for protection from the many ways that the world wounds us. On the way out of church that day, a parishioner pointed out that sometimes we have chinks in our armor so that a well-aimed arrow can injure us. A chink is a narrow opening or fissure, a vulnerability or weakness that could cause a person to fail or be defeated. When we come to church, we enter into our beloved community. We hear scripture and discover the chinks in our armor. We allow ourselves to feel vulnerable. Yet when we can see ourselves as God sees us, we are realigned. We can take our authentic selves into the world and love. James wrote that we will know that religion is pure (the root of this word *re-ligare* means to tie or bind), we will know we are bound to God and each other when we do acts of kindness and compassion like caring for orphans and widows in distress, and when we can keep ourselves unstained by the world.

Dorothy wrote: "What are we trying to do? We are trying to get to heaven, all of us. We are trying to lead a good life. We are trying to talk about and write about the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the social principles of the church, and it is most astounding, the things that happen when you start trying to live this way.

To perform the works of mercy [she's referring to the ones described in Matthew 25, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned] becomes a dangerous practice. Our Baltimore House was closed as a public nuisance because we took in blacks as well as whites. The [staff] were arrested and thrown in jail overnight and accused of running a disorderly house.... It is a good thing to live from day to day and from hour to hour. (Jan. 1948)"

This is the nature of Gospel work. Another doer of the Word, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote that like Jesus, Christians "belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life, but in the midst of enemies. There they find their mission, their work." Then, he quoted Martin Luther: "To rule is to be in the midst of your enemies. And whoever will not suffer this does not want to be part of the rule of Christ; such a person wants to be among friends and sit among the roses and lilies, not with the bad people but with the religious people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing, who would ever have been saved?"

When we try to live the gospel, it is good to live in the present--from day to day and hour to hour. Prayer keeps us moving in the right direction, too. It is not advisable to do this work alone.

Are there any Harry Potter fans out there? Remember what Luna Lovegood said to Harry when he told her he planned to try to destroy the horcruxes, the hidden, cursed pieces of Lord Voldemort's soul, alone? She told him that would be a mistake, because: "Well if I were You-Know-Who, I'd want you to feel cut off from everyone else. Because if it's just you alone you're not as much of a threat." Luna understood the spiritual world.

The church today is often accused of not living out the gospel. Too much attention to perfecting ritual, too little attention to the poor, are some of the ways churches drift from their mission. A few friends shared a New York Times article about Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Only about 35% of San Franciscans described themselves as religious in 2020, compared to 49% nationally. The cathedral's diverse offerings draw in people from different faiths and no faith. It costs \$17,000 a day to keep the cathedral open, so they charge for everything except praying. What community members find there—art exhibits or concerts or yoga classes—brings them peace. The church is caring for people's spirits. They aren't unique. Most churches are looking for alternative ways to make money, then hoping people will return on Sunday morning.

The article doesn't say whether Grace Cathedral's congregation is growing or whether this community serves those in distress. Dorothy Day might wonder if the peace acquired at Grace Cathedral helps people to love. "To love with understanding and without understanding... To see the best in everyone around, their virtues rather than their faults. To see Christ in them!" If the Cathedral's offerings strengthen people so they may serve others, then the church is still living its mission to do good, but entering deeper into our faith offers something more.

This week's Gospel passage from Mark offers a different way of thinking about evil. "...for it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions occur." Mark is trying to persuade Jewish Christian readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one who will save them. Indeed, we are not always good, but if we can see ourselves and others as Jesus saw us (another way to put it is if we can see Christ within each of us), not only will our self-work be easier, but the people we live with will begin to see themselves as we see them,

unshakeably good. This way of being purifies religion, strengthens communities, and ultimately transforms the world.