

XV Pentecost (19b)
Jas 2.1-5, 8-10, 14-18
13 September 2009
Fr. Patrick Allen

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Here we are the morning of the annual parish picnic out at Camp St. Christopher, and I am very much aware that I am the only thing standing between all of you and a day at the beach. Don't worry - I like the beach, too.

There is a difficulty, though, in that these are not really "day at the beach" sorts of lessons. In our Old Testament lesson, the Suffering Servant of the Lord gives "his back to the smiters and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard."

In our Gospel lesson, our Lord predicts and announces his own death, which would be tolerable, except that he also declares that if any of us who wish a share the life his death brings must also die - as in be crucified, take up our cross and follow him all the way to Calvary.

And in our Epistle lesson from James - well, James is just hard, isn't he? It is often said that the Gospel "comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable," and James is heavy on afflicting the comfortable. So much so that, as you've probably learned at some point, the Reformer Martin Luther thought that the Epistle of James should excised from the canon of Scripture altogether. He could find no trace of the Gospel of grace in it. He called it an "Epistle of straw."

But of course James remains in the New Testament - even in Lutheran New Testaments, and if he makes us a bit uneasy in our pew, makes us squirm a little; if he afflicts our carefully constructed and guarded comfort, all the more reason to pay him close attention, all the more reason to suspect that he actually takes us to the heart of the Gospel of grace.

As we heard last Sunday, James' primary concern - actually his Apostolic command - is summed up in his phrase *Be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only*. He is telling us that a faith that is not visible, that does not have real, concrete effects, observable acts of justice, mercy, and humility for the sake of others is something less than, or altogether other than, faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of course, this emphasis of James is of a peace with our Lord's instruction that to love the least of his brethren is to love him. And it is of a piece with St. John's notion that the truth is not something just to be

known but actually something to be done. And it is of a piece with St. Paul's righteous anger toward those who claim to be followers of Christ but who do not "walk in line with the Gospel" and his admonition that those who fail to care for the earthly needs of their own family are actually "worse than unbelievers."

The kind of faith that does not issue in acts of love, but is merely a mental, intellectual assent to the truth of Jesus Christ, the kind of faith that is kindly disposed toward Jesus but prefers to ignore one's neighbors and their needs, the kind of faith that leaves us comfortably at our ease in Zion – that kind of faith, says St. James with his typical bluntness, that kind of faith is dead, a lifeless corpse.

It's important, and – at least for me – discomfoting to note that James is not saying that we need to add some good works to a right faith, a right belief, as if we were adding a little salt to an otherwise perfectly prepared dish. But rather he is saying that we must have the right faith, period – which is a "faith that works." To love God yet be indifferent toward our neighbor is an impossibility; the two cannot be separated. To trust Jesus for salvation but hoard for ourselves is not to trust in Jesus.

Ironically enough, Martin Luther made the point well:

Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them. He who does not these works is a faithless man. He gropes and looks about after faith and good works, and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, though he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

Of course, he then went on to talk and talk, with many words, about faith and good works.

A group of Catholic and Evangelical theologians working together more recently put it this way: *Faith is not merely intellectual assent but an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life.*

So Gospel faith is always incarnate faith, faith with flesh and bones. And to help us analyze our faith, James gives us test cases, observable examples of working faith – or, negatively, of broken faith. He has given us one this morning – a very simple, straightforward test case.

James asks us to take a good, hard look at ourselves, and to observe how we act when we encounter the well-to-do. "If a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes in to your assembly, and a poor man in shabby

clothing also comes in..." he asks, what happens then? Do we show partiality toward the wealthy? Do we fail to honor, and so dishonor, the poor? Do we make distinctions?

Well, we oughtn't. We all know that. But why? Because to do so is to tell a lie. And it's here that James takes us very close to the heart of the Gospel. "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom?" he asks. And the answer to that is simply that from the point of view of the kingdom of Heaven, there are only those who are poor in the world; there are only the guilty; there are only those who stand in need of God's grace and mercy. In fact, there is only you and me, with rings and fine clothes or with shabby clothes and empty pockets. The cross of Jesus Christ is a great leveler - *the great leveler*, and to make distinctions among ourselves is to miss its message and its gift.

We all, as it is sometimes said, stand on level ground at the foot of the cross, and there we know the solidarity of the redeemed, the kinship of the forgiven, which is the communion of saints.

And so we come together to this Altar, and we who are many, among and between whom all sorts of worldly distinctions may be made and lines drawn, but here we are made one body, for we partake of one bread - even Jesus Christ our Lord, who gives himself to the poor and needy, to us.

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