

July 19, 2020

James 1: 22 -- 2:8

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your Word. We pray for illumination, for understanding, for clarity. And then we pray for the courage and boldness to do what it says. Make us doers of the Word. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Gospel of James

The Triune staff went all out on a retirement luncheon this week, with twinkling lights and balloons and flowers and a banner. And gifts! Lots of great gifts.

A new laptop and a case decorated with my book covers.

A mouse pad with a group photo of them taken right here in the sanctuary.

A coffee mug from Don to make up for the dozens I lost around the church.

They made individual videos and wrote cards. But the best thing was they reminded me of some of our worship experiences.

Ira crying “Preach it!” from the third row.

Israel raising his Bible in ecstasy.

A toothpaste fight remarkable only because it happened in the past year. And Christine Duke helping me clean it up, as if *Oh, yeah, this happened in all my previous churches.*

Our social worker Robin wrote a song to the tune of “Joy to the World.” Not the hymn. The “Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog” one. Andy played on his keyboard as they all sang. Loudly. Badly. Here was part of the chorus:

The church is full of people who are living free.

Triune makes us fam-i-ly.

Wow. They nailed it.

If you have worshiped with us often, you know that my favorite thing is to tell the stories of people who are living free. Stories of

rehabilitation and reformation, of revival and renewal. Stories of falling down and getting back up – over and over and over. Stories of our lives together in this place.

But with a staff of 12, many times stories unfurled that I wasn't aware of. I'd receive a card in the mail thanking us for someone's sobriety or housing or help during a time of grief. And I'd take it to a staff meeting and say, *Remind me what happened here. Clearly you were doing work I didn't even know about.*

Or maybe it was someone who was with us only tangentially while mighty works were going on beneath the surface. Just this week I had a visitor who filled me in on a story like that.

It started many years ago, when a woman named Joyce began worshiping with us. Her husband was dying of cancer, and when he grew too weak to travel, Joyce asked me to come to their home in Tigerville to baptize him.

When I arrived, she introduced me to her grandson, a baby-faced young man named Cary Sanders. She said Cary was studying religion at North Greenville University, just a half mile down the road, and could he participate in the baptism and communion? *Of course*, I said, and Cary and I performed the simple rituals together.

Over the next few months, Cary joined his grandmother here in worship.

I thought he was a typical college student, 19 or 20 years old.

I was wrong. Cary was 27 and had been in prison for the previous 9 years for armed robbery and attempted murder. His grandmother didn't want anyone to know – because heaven knows we've never had anyone from prison worship here before.

I slowly began to learn of Cary's past when he contacted me about JumpStart, the prison ministry he'd gone to work for. By the time he was 17, he'd been arrested 17 times. He shot a drug dealer during an armed

robbery. After his arrest, his friends' parents breathed sighs of relief that he'd be removed from their children's lives.

But during his incarceration, God and JumpStart worked a mighty miracle. Cary, who had hardly set foot in a church previously, accepted Christ and became an inside-prison leader of the Bible study curriculum that begins JumpStart's work.

When Cary got out of prison, JumpStart's supporters saw his potential. They encouraged him to go to college at North Greenville, near his home.

Well, that was a problem, he told them. He had been put on a *lifetime ban* from the campus because he had broken in and stolen so often from the college.

Plus, he had only a GED.

Plus, his family couldn't afford it.

But his mentors persisted, and persuaded the university not only to lift his lifetime ban but give him a full ride. As Cary continued working

for JumpStart, he got his bachelor's degree, then a master's degree. He is now married, has a 9-month-old son, and is working on his doctorate of ministry, again on a full ride from the university.

I got to know Cary better and better, as I officiated at his grandparents' funerals, helped introduced JumpStart to Greenville through a meeting at Triune, spoke at their volunteer banquet in Columbia, shot a video for a fundraiser. I became a big fan of the work they do with transitioning prisoners to housing and jobs on the outside.

But I was always a little curious as to why Cary kept circling back to Triune to ask me to take part in those things.

When he came by this week to say goodbye, he reminded me that he'd worshiped here with his grandmother when he was three weeks out of prison. It was pretty much the first church outside prison he'd ever attended. And the young man I mistook for a clean-cut, privileged college boy was actually in need of grace, in need of being called a child of God.

In need of being in a *church full of people living free*.

Now, Triune had nothing to do with how that young man turned out. He is a product of God and JumpStart in one of the most beautiful turnaround stories I've had the privilege to witness.

He's paying it forward by running JumpStart's programs inside prisons all over the state and helping build a new campus for transitional housing on the Spartanburg-Greenville county line.

But how exciting to see how his life intersected with ours again and again. To know how our community will benefit for decades from the ripples he's sending out.

For you see, Cary Sanders is a doer of the Word. That's a phrase straight out of the epistle of James.

I told you last week that I'd been cleaning out files and running across favorite Scripture passages. Outside the gospel stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there's little more powerful to me than the epistle of James.

Scholars think that the author of this letter may have been the earthly brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem. Whoever he was, James had no use for timid hearers of the Word. He writes about doers of the Word, those who put muscle to their faith.

Not everyone shares my enthusiasm for this letter. The founder of Protestantism, 16th century Reformer Martin Luther, called it “an epistle of straw ... with nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”

But for me there is a direct and irrefutable link from Jesus’s teaching in the gospels – feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, *visit the imprisoned* -- to James’ teachings in this letter. James is merely echoing what Jesus said, explaining what Jesus taught, preaching what Jesus stood for.

I’m reading from James 1, starting with verse 22. **James 1: 22- 2: 8.**

22 (B)e doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at

themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

2My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', ⁴have you not made

distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

“Be doers of the word,” James writes.

I love that. The NIV translation loses the poetry. It reads, **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”**

That's clear enough, I suppose. But the NRSV opts for: **“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”**

If there is one thing that mystifies me in this world, it is how so many people hear the Word and, from every piece of evidence, deceive themselves.

Because how do you hear the Word and deport immigrants who were brought to this country as toddlers?

How do you hear the Word and tell gays and lesbians and transgender people they are less than?

How do you hear the Word and accept policies that give some people a head start in life and start others in a deep hole?

Hearing the Word, taking it in, requires something of us. It requires us to take on an identity as a *doer of the Word*.

And indeed, it is an identity. For even when a doer of the word is eating or sleeping or skeetshooting or parasailing, he is still essentially a

doer of the word. That's who he is. He is a doer – and not just a frenzied doer who does anything that comes along. But a doer of God's Word.

What a magnificent phrase!

“For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror ... and on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”

In James' world view, *doing* carries the idea of imprinting.

Educators will tell you that we can learn by hearing and seeing, but when we *do*, when we perform an action, our learning is more permanent, more imprinted in our neural pathways. James goes a step further: **“(Those) doers who act -- they will be blessed in their doing.”**

He also talks about bridling our tongues, which we Americans seem to have thrown out the window in recent decades. The coarseness, the vulgarity, the meanness of our public debate is discouraging.

Because speaking is something we *do*. And when we speak with hatefulness, with rancor, with disdain, with willful ignorance, hateful actions will follow.

When we wave the Bible around as a prop with no inkling of what it says, much less an inclination *to do* what it says, we are flirting with blasphemy.

James goes so far as to say he who speaks with an unbridled tongue has a worthless religion. Control of one's speech is connected to the sincerity of one's religion.

We see this same concern for unbridled speech in Paul. In his list of transgressions of the human race in Romans, Paul includes gossip, slander and boastfulness – all sins of the tongue.

In James' summary statements, he curtly explains what constitutes religion in its pure and undefiled form. It **“is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”**

And just for good measure, he quotes Jesus: **‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’** It always comes back to that, doesn’t it?

There are those who parse theological terms and would drive a wedge between James, who was head of the Jewish wing of the Christian church, and Paul, an authority of the Gentile wing. But Paul, too, knows nothing of Christianity without action. Every letter he writes contains practical material on living as a Christian.

And that is exactly what James is doing here. He may be stating it a little more baldly, a little more clearly, a little more adamantly. But if one’s Christianity does not lead one to be a “doer of the Word,” then that Christianity is suspect at best, “worthless” at worst.

Or as he puts it later in this letter: **“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 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.” (James 2: 14-17)

Of course, at Triune, this is where we hang our hat: Meeting bodily needs and welcoming into the assembly the poor, the one with dirty clothes.

The addicted, the homeless, the mentally ill, the disabled, the formerly incarcerated, the marginalized -- those are the people we want in this place. Why? Because Jesus told us to want them in this place.

Why? Because South African bishop Peter Storey once said, “You cannot ask Jesus into your heart alone. He will ask, ‘Can I bring my friends?’ You will look at his friends, the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, and you will hesitate. But Jesus is clear: ‘Only if I can bring my friends.’ ”

I pray that Triune will always be the kind of place that welcomes Jesus and his rowdy friends -- whether they’re wearing gold rings or dirty clothes.

. I pray that it will be the kind of place that welcomes clean-cut former prisoners who are transforming the lives of those who follow them out of prison.

I pray it will always be a *church full of people who are living free.*

Amen.