

Practicing What We Preach

September 2, 2012

James 1:17-27

Before I get into the main part of the sermon, let me say a few words about the Old Testament lesson that Dana read. The Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs as it is commonly called, is not often read in our worship services, and, I suspect, even less used as a sermon text.

There has been, and still is a lot of discussion among Bible scholars, pastors and lay people about just what this book is doing in our canon scripture.

And there are still a lot questions about its origin – where did it come from, who wrote it, and really what it's all about – does it actually have anything to do with God and religion

I'm not going to get into all of that today – it might make an interesting Bible study sometime.

I simply want to point out that, while some try to think of it as nothing but an erotic poem totally out of place in holy scripture, the justification for its inclusion in our canon is that the book as a whole contains love songs that some hear as parables of God's love for us.

Today's passage contains an invitation to the beloved, set in the context of spring and new life.

In any case, it is an interesting work. If you haven't read it lately, you might check it out and see what you think.

Turning now to today's other text, I have chosen the epistle reading from James as the sermon text, rather than the gospel reading from the seventh chapter of Mark, which is today's lectionary gospel lesson.

And actually the gospel reading and the passage from James are very similar in their message. Read Mark 7 as you have opportunity – you'll see what I mean.

Jesus turns criticism of allegedly not keeping laws about cleanliness into a critique of attending to God in “words only,” while neglecting what one does in life and what one harbors in the heart.

To be truthful, James is one of my favorite books of the Bible, probably in some ways the favorite, because the writer talks extensively about the practical application of our faith – how to live out what we say we believe.

James is probably the oldest book of the New Testament, by that I mean the first one written. Bible scholars have dated it to around 45 CE, before any of Paul's missionary journeys and before the first Council of Jerusalem in 50 CE.

It is not known with certainty who wrote the epistle. Many believe it was James the brother of Jesus and head of the church in Jerusalem. Others question that for various reasons which I won't take the time to go into this morning

But whoever the author, James is a collection of early Jewish-Christian wisdom materials. As with other wisdom writings, it emphasizes wisdom not so much as what one knows about God but how one lives in response to God. It parallels in many ways the Sermon on the Mount, offering practical ways to live out those teachings.

We see in the Book of James a challenge to faithful followers of Jesus Christ - to, as we would say today, not just "talk the talk" but "walk the walk."

James has not been without its detractors. Martin Luther called it an "epistle of straw" and would have had it removed from the canon.

Luther's biggest issue was that he felt the book placed entirely too much emphasis on what we do – works instead of grace. And you will recall that grace was Luther's main theme.

But, Luther notwithstanding, and not to diminish the importance of grace in any way. I do believe that James has much to teach us that Jesus would certainly approve of, and I want us to look at one of those ideas this morning.

Have you ever, as a parent or in any other way, been tempted to use the line, "do as I say, not as I do"? Maybe you have actually used it. I think most parents probably have.

The problem with the phrase is the mixed signals it sends. On the one hand, it can be an honest expression that we don't always live up to our expectations. On the other hand, it may give the impression of approving double standards of behavior.

Telling a son or daughter not to do drugs while the parent goes on abusing alcohol is not likely to carry much weight. "Do as I say and not as I do" can create a mindset that assumes when one becomes an adult, one is free to have one's actions contradict one's words.

Perhaps the best antidote to the abuses of "Do as I say and not as I do" resides in another proverb: *Practice what you preach*. If the words are good enough to say, then they're good enough to do.

It is interesting that the antidote contains within it the language of the church. Education teaches, politics persuades – but the church preaches.

"Practice what you preach" assumes that there is the possibility of doing the opposite: of not practicing the preaching, of not putting into action the words of faith.

That should come as no surprise to anyone, especially given the tendency to sometimes limit questions about faith to questions about words.

Consider, for example, the typical question someone usually asks or certainly thinks about when considering joining a church. In my experience, “What do you believe?” far outnumbers “What do you do?” in such inquiries.

And isn't that the way Christians sort of check each other out, if you will, in many cases wanting to know what someone else believes to determine if they are a “real Christian.” I have to tell you – that practice troubles me and I definitely do not recommend or condone it.

Yes, we may assume that in knowing what is believed we will know what is being done. But that isn't necessarily the case. Words can be differently interpreted and acted upon.

Or, they can be flat out ignored. “Practicing the preaching” means that the words of faith are expressed in the actions of faith as best we are able by the Spirit's leading.

Now - you can search through all the Biblical concordances and reference books and never find Jesus, Moses, or anybody else in the biblical witness commanding us to “practice what you preach.”

Our text in James is about as close as those words come to being said outright: “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (Jas 1:22).

James's theme is more inclusive, much more so. Some might say, and in fact do say, that “practicing what you preach” is limited to the responsibility of preachers. And there is a certain truth to that.

Those set apart by the church in ordained ministry do have expectations placed upon their lives for living their words, although that can be applied almost cruelly at worst and unreasonably at best.

In my experience, counseling and talking with other ministers, the biggest reason I hear for people leaving the ministry is, “folks won't let me be human.”

Certainly, almost all members of the clergy that I know and have ever known are conscientious about living out the gospel of Jesus Christ as they understand it. But they shouldn't have to abandon their humanity to do it.

Having said that, however, is not to declare that only clergy have a responsibility of seeking consistency in words and actions. James does not call upon us to be “doers of the word and not preachers only.” James calls us to be “doers of the word and not hearers only.”

Consistency between word and action, between preaching and practice, is the responsibility of everyone in the church. God's word – whether we preach it or hear it – is the word we are to do, the word we are to express in our actions.

James describes the difference between hearing and doing by using parallel illustrations. The one who is only a hearer of the word is like someone who stares at herself or himself in a mirror.

There are ways in which the word of the gospel is like a mirror held up before us. In its light, we see not only who we have been and who we are, but also who we can be by the grace of God.

To hear that word is to look into that mirror. But to only look in a mirror is to accomplish no change. The one who only hears is able to walk away and forget, untouched by the experience.

An alcoholic can be shown exactly what is happening to her or him. But unless the word heard gets inside and acted upon, he or she will walk away from that mirror image unchanged.

The end result of only hearing in James's text is deception. And the Greek word used there literally means to "reason wrongly." To be a hearer only is to mislead oneself.

In contrast, the one who is a doer of the word also looks into the mirror held up to us in the word God speaks and in the Word God showed us in Jesus Christ.

Instead of observing and then "going away," that person "perseveres." Instead of forgetting what was seen, that person keeps at the hard but necessary task of acting out the mirror's vision in daily life.

For doers, the vision given by God's word does not dissolve or fade away as an unutilized memory. Rather, it becomes the blueprint for one's own words, actions, and decisions.

The teachings and examples of Jesus the Christ and revealed to us through scripture is a word not just taken to heart but acted out in life. The end result for the doer of the word is not deception but blessing.

For James, "Do as I say and not as I do" is not an adequate philosophy. It may express the weakness that will at times surface in our lives – the gap between the words of our faith and the actions of our lives.

However, we cannot be content to leave the matter there. We are called to be doers of the word, practitioners of the gospel we preach.

For centuries since Martin Luther's time, people like him have tried to de-emphasize James' emphasis on what we do, preferring to fall back on Paul's idea of grace through faith. What I think these folks fail to realize is that faith is not just what we hear or say about God. Christian faith involves how we live and act in response to the God revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Faith's best witness comes in the integrity of word set to deed.

Integrity. That's a good word to sum up the desired relationship between our words and our actions, our profession and our practice of the faith.

This kind of integrity makes it possible for us to affirm “Do as I say and as I do,” not out of self-righteous pride but out of the simple truth that faith’s best witness is the doing of Christ’s word.

For in our doing of that word lies the purpose of God for us and the blessing of God upon us.