

Lectionary 22B 2018, James 1:17-27, September 2, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Bumper sticker theology. I've seen some good ones over the years. "If God is your co-pilot, you'd better change places." "Never drive faster than your angels can fly." Or this one, "Where am I going and why am I in this handbasket?"

Recently I saw one that simply said, "Kindness is my religion." At first I thought, "That's pretty shallow." If I thought about it long enough I'd realize behind my judgmental thought was a more realistic, fearful one: "if everyone thought that way I'd be out of a job."

James, whose letter we read this morning, seems to confirm this little piece of bumper sticker theology. He concludes the portion we just heard with this sentence, "Religion 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." Isn't that really a definition of true kindness; to care for those who are most in need and not get caught up in the cares and demands of life, to tread lightly upon this earth remembering and acting with the understanding you aren't the only, nor the most important, person here. Kindness is more than just being nice to small animals, children, and the elderly. True kindness is not shallow. Rather a kind heart is always a generous heart, a heart always looking outside of one's own life and self-interest.

James, our author, writes to folks who might be, for lack of a better term, "Sunday Christians." These are people who come to church on Sunday, pray the prayers, sing the hymns, greet one another with a smile and a hug, and then begin their week spreading gossip about their neighbors, cheating on their income tax, abusing their spouse, kicking the dog, flipping off the driver who pulls in front of them, resenting the new car just bought by the guy next door, bragging how their kid just beat out all the other kids at soccer, posting that picture on Facebook sipping tropical cocktails in some expensive, all inclusive resort....well, you get the picture. None of us, that's for sure.

Except, it could be any of us. Now, don't get me wrong. I don't think this congregation is filled with hypocrites. At least not any more than the average congregation of believing Christians. But the truth is Christians have been wrestling with this tension ever since the first days of the first believers. Some believe that believing is everything and the only thing. St. Paul puts a huge emphasis on believing and faith in Christ. He says such radical things like, "Faith in Christ saves you. Works of law don't save you." And every Lutheran in the room

stands up and goes, "Yay!" And then James comes along as says, "faith alone doesn't save you. You need to show your true faith by your works." And all the Lutherans put a scowl on their face and look glum.

The truth is both Paul and James are saying the same thing, but each in their own way. Both Paul and James insist that faith in Christ leads to changed lives; behaviors that are now consistent with becoming followers of Jesus. But they both, James and Paul, begin from the point of grace and the free gift of God in Jesus Christ. Notice how James begins the passage we just heard: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Every generous act of giving. Those are the good works of kindness and generosity, the acts of caring for those who are weak. They find their source in God. Our generosity, our kindness, our works of love aren't performed to impress God or insure our status as gifted in some unique way. No, they are merely the responses to a loving and generous God who accepts us as his own, even before we have anything to say about it.

In this way Baptizing an infant is the perfect illustration of God's grace in action. This morning Scott Patrick Kiernan will be enfolded by God's grace into the kingdom of God and the Church of Christ. He will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. His baptism will become an indelible mark, a permanent moment in the story of his life. And guess what, SJ, as his parents like to call him, doesn't have anything to say about it. His parents are going to make promises that they will make sure he knows he is baptized and what difference that makes in his life. But for SJ baptized is something that he simply is; by God's loving and freely given gift of grace.

James gives us practical, and easily understood, contours of what the life of baptized followers of Jesus can show as they live in the world. We heard one already, "generous." Jesus followers are generous because God is generous to us. Jesus followers are to "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." This practical wisdom and becomes an important way to help shape a child, and even an adult, into the ways of discipleship. For when we listen before we speak we grow in understanding someone else. Our first reaction isn't to try to put ourselves forward or even first. When we truly listen we are then able to respond, generously, kindly. You see how this all starts to fit together?

It also means the Christian life is not heroic, it's not something reserved for the saintly or otherworldly among us. Faithfully following Jesus is available to all of us. All we do that is good comes from God. And those places of doing good are

as close as your family, as close as your neighbors, as close as your place of work, as close as the community in which you live. These are the places God is at work because it's where you are.

So as you leave here this morning, maybe even now as I wrap this up, I want you think of one place you will be this week where God could use you to listen, to be patient, to care for someone in need. Where will you be that you might be a "doer of the word" you are hearing right now? How will you live out your baptism, God's claim on your life, this coming week, knowing that your act of kindness, your generosity, is already a gift itself. Amen.