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Pentecost 17B
Peace, Seattle
August 30, 2009 epk
James 1:17-27, Mark 7

GOD'S WORK, OUR HANDS

This morning's texts are all about boundaries and expectations.

- What God expects from us.
- What we have a right to expect from each other.
- And whether those boundaries and expectations are of divine origin or human origin.

The author of James and the Pharisees from Mark's story actually have quite a bit in common.

- Both argue that our acts and deeds matter…
- that it's how we actually live that provides the most powerful evidence of what we believe…
- that when it comes to faith, words in and of themselves, unaccompanied by acts, are empty.

Our lesson from James is the first in a series we'll be hearing over the next five weeks.
James was a leader in the Jerusalem church. He didn't have the theological training of Paul.
He wasn't a gifted writer. But he was motivated by the conviction that this young Christian movement must understand that the core of the Christian gospel was about action.

- **First, God's action** on our behalf in Jesus Christ,
- **then our subsequent acts of love** as a natural response to what God has accomplished through Christ.

James doesn't spend a lot of time developing themes in his letter.
He tends to move quickly from one topic to another. **But the focus of his letter is always clear.**

- **What does being a Christian look like?**
- **How does my faith get worked out concretely in every day life?**

The message of James is that the life of true faith is a life in *motion*.
BE DOERS OF THE WORD, he says, AND NOT HEARERS ONLY.

A central challenge of the community to which James penned his letter was:
How do we maintain our fidelity and a distinctive Christian identity in the face of the overwhelming presence of Roman culture?

In many ways the Pharisaic movement within 1st Century Judaism was a response to a similar question; a question Israel had faced ever since the Babylonian exile:
How do we maintain our identity and fidelity to God's teaching in the face of the encroaching political, social, cultural, and religious ideas from the dominant cultures of the day?

The answer, for the Pharisaic movement, lay in part in the purity laws and holiness codes that helped them to define themselves over against their neighbors.[1]

Rules for observing the Sabbath, circumcision, dietary restrictions, public health edicts, and other clear boundaries helped to define who was part of the community and who was not; they helped ensure the integrity of the community.

[1] See Karoline Lewis, *New Proclamation, 2009*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. Page 187.

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By the time of Jesus, THE TEN COMMANDS God gave for shaping relationship with God and neighbor had evolved and expanded into an intricate and carefully reasoned body of case law built up to show how the Torah was to be put into practice.[2]

This so-called "FENCE" around the law had become more like a WALL that alienated the people of God and prevented especially the poor and disenfranchised from experiencing the God who invited them close.

It's into this context that Jesus comes, gathering a community around him that includes the poor, women, the sick, tax collectors, and many who had no conceivable means of fulfilling the purity laws.

Throughout the gospels, the points where Jesus gets into trouble are the points where he defies the tradition. He announces that God again has come near—is near right now—and that the invitation to relationship with God is not restricted, as before.

Purity, he says in today's story, is a matter of the human will, not the digestive system.

Jesus isn't erasing the boundary—but he's moving it so that includes those who former tradition had written off. As he says elsewhere, in response to the Pharisees' protestations:

GO LEARN WHAT THIS MEANS: I DESIRE MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE;
FOR I HAVE COME TO CALL NOT THE RIGHTEOUS BUT SINNERS. [Matt 9:13]

The God we glimpse in Jesus is decidedly NOT the divine JUDGE who watches with clipboard in hand, keeping track of our every step, ready to WHACK us up side of the head when the total number of failings in a given column reach a critical number.

Some may feel more comfortable with such a God, and goodness knows there's enough preaching that goes on extolling such a God. But this is not the God whose image we see reflected in the one who emptied himself, becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross. [Phil. 2]

At the cross, all our systems, all our ladders, all our schemes for working our way into God's good graces are shown what they truly are: deceit and death; and we finally come to the realization that if life is to be ours at all, it cannot come to us through our efforts; it can only come as a gift from OUTSIDE of us.

And yet, paradoxically, it is our actions, how we carry ourselves in the world, that point to the presence of this gift within us.

Brother Martin said: it is as impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire.[3]

And Brother James put it this way: You think you're religious? I'll tell you what true religious looks like: Caring for orphans and widows, remembering who you are and to whom you belong. [Jms. 1:26-27]

[2] Donald Juel, *Mark*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000), p.102.
[3] Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul's to the Romans," in *Luther's Works* 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 371.

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CALVIN AND HOBBES[4]

A Calvin and Hobbes comic strip once had Calvin ask Hobbes,

> "Hobbes, do you think our morality is defined by our actions or what's in our hearts?"
> Hobbes replies, "I think our actions *show* what's in our hearts."
> The next frame finds Calvin with a blank stare in response to Hobbes's answer.
> In the final frame, Calvin yells out, *"I Resent That!"*

Some matters of faith can seem terribly complicated but this is not one! (Darn it)

How do you tell if a Christian community—our congregation—is on track?
You simply look at how the most vulnerable in the community are engaged, treated, cared for.

When Red Jacket, a member of the Seneca tribe and a great orator, was asked, at a great council, to respond to the Evangelical Missionary Society of Massachusetts, which had offered to bring the Christian religion to the Six Nations Confederacy, he politely and eloquently turned down the offer. But he left the door open with these final words to the young missionary:

> "Brother!" he told Reverend Crum. "We are told that you have been preaching to the white people in this place. These people are our neighbors. We are acquainted with them. We will wait a little while, and see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good and makes them honest and less disposed to cheat Indians, we will then consider again what you have said."[5]

As we come to the Lord's Table today, we tune our ears for God's word of grace and forgiveness. And then, having received his gifts, we listen once more for our marching orders; for what Christ has in mind for us today as he leads us from hearing and receiving to doing.

Amen.

[4] Quoted by Lewis, op. cit.
[5] *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by noted Indian Chieftains.* Compiled by W. C. Vanderwerth. University of Oklahoma Press, 1971. Pp. 43-47.