

St. Paul's Congregational Church
September 2, 2018; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-23
Generous Acts
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It has been quite a week, hasn't it. Yes – it's been another steamy, hot, week – I'm sure we're all looking forward to the cool, crisp days of the fall. But it's also been a week of mourning – not for just the end of summer – but also mourning two giants of our country - Aretha Franklin - Queen of Soul – and John McCain. I've spent much time watching two extraordinary funerals this week – so different from each other, yet both so very powerful, listening to stories and eulogies, familiar prayers and scripture, great music, seeing tears, hearing laughter: reflecting on the state of our country as events continue to unfold on a daily basis. Such a contrast as we celebrate the life of a woman who became one of the faces of the Civil Rights Movement, as we celebrate the life of a man who endured 5 ½ years of torture at the Hanoi Hilton who went on to serve his country in government – I didn't always agree with his politics but I did admire his strength and integrity, his insistence that “we are better than this” and his efforts showing us how to work together, to bring peace and justice to all.

In the midst of all the competing voices of this week, I found myself wondering about the message for this morning – the challenges we all face as we move into the future – in our world, in our country, in our families, indeed in our church. The change of season, the loss of great national figures, can lead to such thoughts, can't they – it's a dangerous world we live in today, our children go off to college, people who we care about have died or are seriously ill, and here we're about to begin our celebration of our 125th Anniversary of the ministry of St. Paul's, even as we think about what our future holds.

On Saturday morning I got up, got my coffee, and turned on the coverage of the McCain Memorial Service – and heard presidential historian Jon Meacham speaking, of all things, about our scripture passage for today – from the Book of James – be doers of the word – doers of the word not just hearers of the word, but doers – a source of hope to oppressed people everywhere.

So, here we are – reflecting on the experiences of the past week on this Labor Day weekend - we have these scripture lessons this morning that offer us an amazing challenge and way of ordering our life together – in our world, in our country, in the life of our church, in our own lives as followers, disciples, of Christ.

The words are surprisingly harsh: Jesus and James both speak of the evil that is within us. James tells us to rid ourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness. James scolds us: you must understand this – let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. And he goes on: if any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

Strong words, aren't they. And I truly believe we already know these things – but we need to be reminded. Knowing these things on an intellectual level is different from living, breathing, these words, from doing what we're commanded to do.

Jesus never asked his hearers, do you agree with me? Jesus never asked his disciples, does this sound reasonable to most of you? Jesus wanted, wants, demands more than agreement. Jesus said, follow me! Jesus is after discipleship, not just intellectual agreement.

Discipleship isn't about intellectual agreement, is it. In fact, often discipleship is far from it - it's countercultural - it's counterintuitive. It doesn't always make sense from a worldly perspective. Our tendency I think is to turn the gospel into some kind of intellectual quest – but scripture doesn't just want to be understood on that level. The gospel longs to be put into action – often our tendency is to step back, ponder, think, consider, reflect, rather than to see what the Bible is calling us to do is to get moving – get into the act – perform the text rather than just speak or hear it.

A minister once asked a group of lay people what they looked for in a good sermon. “I like a sermon that helps me to think about things in a new way” was the predominant response. I like a sermon that engages my mind, that spurs my thinking and reflection.

The minister thought – that sounds good to me – I like to preach interesting, engaging, thoughtful sermons. But the more he thought about it, he wondered if their response was not quite right. He realized that there is something about us that loves to think that all worship is about is sitting, listening, taking in. But there's an incompleteness to this.

James tells us – be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Worship isn't a spectator sport, is it. Discipleship isn't a spectator sport, is it.

We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have done the faith when we have merely listened, reflected, pondered, agreed. Sometimes we hear people say of church on Sunday morning, “I think of church as a filling station. I come here empty, and during the service I get filled so I can make it through the week.” And that’s not a bad thing for sure. But is that what worship is supposed to be? Passive? About me? It seems to me that it reduces church to a place where we come, sit back, and say, ok preacher, choir, organist – do it to me. Fill me up.

But that’s not what James says, is it. That’s not what Jesus calls us to, is it. The test for good worship, the mark of a good church is not what we do here during this hour of worship. It’s about what we do outside these doors for the rest of the week. Doers of the word. Not merely hearers of the word.

Does our worship change us? Does our worship challenge us? Does our worship call us to deeds of love and justice? Does our worship make any difference in the way we live our lives?

James tells us, religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world. Unstained by the world. Religion that is pure and undefiled calls us to act – the question is, what will we do with what we have said, sung, and heard? How does our time together here in worship inform our every day living? In our committee meetings? In the way we treat each other? What difference does our faith make to our family members? The neighbors we meet? The bosses we work for? The homeless strangers we pass on busy streets? The person sitting right next to us this morning who may be desperately hurting, lonely. We’re called to do the word. Not just hear it. We’re called to break out of ourselves, to break out of the stresses of everyday living long enough to think about the needs of others. Regardless of the cost. Regardless of inconvenience. Regardless of the interruption to our routine.

In a book called *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles writes about Ginny, a young girl from a poor family who is bright, articulate, imaginative, and has a keenly developed spirituality. One day, Ginny was walking home and met an elderly woman who seemed lost and confused. Ginny asked her if she needed help, and she responded, “If you could, that would be wonderful.” Ginny discovered that she had been walking to visit her daughter, but had gotten disoriented. She showed Ginny the written directions she had, and Ginny knew immediately where she had gotten lost and where she needed to go.

Although Ginny was now late getting home for her chores, she sensed that getting this troubled stranger safely to her destination was the chore she most needed to be doing. She walked with her, talked to her, listened to her as the woman spoke of the pain in her life, and guided her to her daughter's home.

When they arrived and Ginny started to leave, the woman grasped her arm and announced that God had sent Ginny to her and that later she would pray a prayer of thanks to God for having Ginny there and she gave Ginny a kiss.

On her way home, Ginny wondered what it would be like to be old - she wondered if she were old and in need if God would send some kid like her to help. "Maybe God puts you here," Ginny thought, "and gives you these hints of what's ahead and you should pay attention to them because that's God speaking to you."

There on the road, as a little girl helped a stranger in need, performing the chore she knew most needed to be done, the presence of God became real to this elderly woman and her family. And to Ginny. Doing the word. Not merely hearing the word.

Children have a way of cutting to the chase, don't they. Children have a way of keeping things simple that can be lost on us grownups. We can make things so complicated, so convoluted sometimes - we can overthink, can't we.

Our readings this morning catch us with their simplicity - even with their harsh words. But sometimes we need harsh words to wake us up to our calling as disciples. Sometimes we need harsh words to jar us out of ourselves and our fears and anxieties. Sometimes those harsh words will reach in and challenge us to follow Jesus in new and exciting ways. On this Labor Day weekend as we look forward to the start of a new program year, to our next 125 years, let us hear these words, let us live these words, full of the promise that God is with us, that God is still speaking.

And know that we get the strength we need for our discipleship here at the Table - we eat and drink out of a yearning to come together and we eat and drink that we may serve the God who loves us all. Jon Meacham spoke about this on Saturday as well as he reflected on the crowd gathered for Senator McCain's service: it's the common purpose that unites us. It's gathering around the table - a sense of community coming together - coming together in communion. And as we are fed, may each of us bring God's presence to all we meet. Let us be doers of the Word. That's what God wants from us. That's what Jesus demands of us. What are you going to do today? Amen.

