

Rev. Lisa Schrott
September 1, 2024
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-25;
Doers of the Word

Our New Testament scripture passage this morning is from the Epistle of James. Traditionally this letter has been attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. James was a leader of the church in Jerusalem. However, the consensus among scholars is that the writing was attributed to James by those who admired him as “the Christian authority most loyal to Judaism,” as noted by New Testament scholar Raymond Brown.¹ The opening of the letter states that it is written to followers of Christ outside of Palestine, specifically to those who see themselves following in the lineage of the Hebrew faith. The letter is filled with references to Old Testament teachings that can make it difficult to appreciate without recognizing the frame of the Hebrew scriptures.

It is fitting that in the Revised Common Lectionary – the cycle of scripture passages churches often follow throughout the liturgical year – that this passage follows the one we heard last week from Joshua, which asks the Hebrew people as they organize into communities in the land of Canaan, whom they will serve and how they will serve. In many ways, this epistle is asking the same question to communities who are followers of Christ. You have heard the good news of the Gospel, you have seen the ministry of Jesus in action – feeding, teaching, healing, and welcoming. You have repented of your sins and understand your salvation is not based on anything you can achieve or earn. So what are you to do? You have “heard” and now it is time to “do.” With that frame in mind, hear now these words from the first chapter of the Epistle of James.

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. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved siblings: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. But 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.

This is Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

¹ Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Doubleday, 1996. p726

The title of the news article caught my attention: “Dumping of Bible verse bottles in river seemingly stop.” The story from the BBC shared that an appeal aimed at stopping the large scale dumping of plastic bottles containing Bible verses in the River Bann in Northern Ireland appears to have worked. It seems that in the past few years, thousands of bottles with religious messages tucked inside had been thrown into the water, ending up in the reed beds, mud and paths alongside the river in Coleraine.

“Earlier this year, an environmental group called Sea2it appealed publicly to whoever was behind the bottles to cease their activities - and it seems they have heeded that message. "There are still some of the older bottles in the river system and caught in the reed beds but there's definitely a substantial decrease in any new bottles," said Andrew Bratton from Sea2it.

When BBC News NI visited the site in January, the bottles were noticeable with a quick glance of the reed beds. The bottles had all been meticulously cleaned and dried, before the Bible messages were rolled up, placed inside and the top screwed on tightly, and thrown into the river. There were thousands of them, suggesting someone had put a lot of time and effort into this. No groups nor individuals came forward to admit they were behind the messages

The story of the bottles caused a stir in the town when it initially emerged. "We had hundreds of messages on our Facebook page," Bratton said. "Some in support, some focusing on what they felt was us trying to lambast religious groups. "But we stressed throughout this was not about us being anti-religious, it just wasn't the appropriate way to share that message in 2024." ²

Maybe the folks in Coleraine felt that to be “doers of the word” they needed to get the word out to others and this was the best way to do it. Forget Insta and Facebook and X and Tik-Tok, let’s go old school and put scriptures in bottles and float them down the river. When people fish them out of the reeds, they will receive a blessing. After all it worked for Moses when his mother put him in a basket and Pharoah’s daughter pulled him out from the reeds. I’m thinking this is not what James meant when he told the audience for his letters, “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.”

James wrote this letter to encourage the followers of Jesus not to sidestep their ethical obligations to neighbors (so I don’t think that filling the local river with plastic would count.) Demonstrate your faith by going beyond words and getting some skin in the game. This is a letter that is “preaching to choir” so to speak. The intent of the letter is not evangelism – not trying to draw more people to Christ. In fact, there are only two brief references to Christ

² Catherine Morrison. Dumping of Bible verse bottles in river seemingly stop; *BBC News*. August 27, 2024 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clynd8jmj0vo>

in the five chapters of the letter. Instead, this letter is an instruction for those who have already embraced Christ, who already understand that salvation comes as a free gift through grace and faith. James provides moral exhortations and wisdom, practical ways of living – covering everything from the way we speak to each other, our business practices, dealing with trials and temptations, responses to people in need, and our life together as a Christian community.

James says to them, “You must understand this, my beloved siblings...” You must understand how to live in community and “hearing” is not enough. Now to appreciate how this command to be “doers” rather than “hearers” might have challenged the senses of the people who were following in the lineage of the Hebrew faith, we need to consider the Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy you heard Jeff read.

Now, Israel, **hear the decrees** and laws I am about to teach you. ... Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations....

Moses said to the people “**hear** the decrees and laws...observe them.” Two chapters later in Deuteronomy 6 Moses says what will become one of the most well-known passages in the Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” This passage is often referred to as *The Shema*, for the opening word “Hear” in Hebrew.

For those Christians whose lineage sprung from Jewish roots, the command to “hear” is sacred. What James is reminding the people is that there is a lot wrapped up into the word “hear.” It means to remember the history of God’s people. Of God’s faithfulness, liberating the captives from slavery, feeding the people manna in the wilderness, giving them a covenant to organize their lives. And “to hear” is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might and your neighbor as yourself.

For James it was important for the earliest Christians to remember, to remember the empty tomb and the sacrifice of Jesus, because memory will lead to action. And for James it was about communal memory, memory of oppression and injustice, and the memory of joy and hope.

In a commentary on this text, scholar Aaron Uitti points out that the Torah – the law - relayed at Mt. Sinai gave structure to the Hebrew people as they formed new community. Likewise the law taught by Jesus gives formation to the people now in dispersion. Uitti says, “It teaches them how to live as God’s holy people in the tension between faith and culture.” He likens the word to an “internal gyroscope” implanted in each of us, which guides the overall community.³

³ Aaron L. Uitti. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p15,17

I think of the word as an “internal gyroscope” in much the same way Moses refers to binding the word on your foreheads and tying them to the doorposts. They are to be with you always such that it is impossible for you not be “doers of the word.” Every action we take is affected by our understanding of God’s word – our personal interactions, our social lives, the way we understand the economics of society, the way we think, and the way we work to adjust society and culture to resemble the “kin-dom of God” rather than the “kingdom of the empire.” We cannot compartmentalize our lives – all of it belongs to God.⁴

One of the implications of James’ writing (and that of Moses’ words in Deuteronomy) is that there is no such thing as a passive follower of God. James uses an analogy for what it means for people of faith to live as “hearers only.” He says they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. As “doers of the word” we cannot pass the buck to someone else when we see injustice; when kindness is called for rather than a harsh word; when we see someone excluded from the table.

On Wednesday night at the All Church Planning Meeting, I shared a video of a TEDx talk from Presbyterian activist, songwriter and author David LaMotte titled *Why Heroes Don’t Change the World*. LaMotte tells the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery, AL bus boycott from a different perspective than we normally hear it. Rather than being the result of actions of one person – “hero work”, the lasting impact of the boycott was a result of groups of people – committees – who banded together to do the work. LaMotte called this “movement work.” I call it being “doers of the word.” As I shared in the words of preparation in the bulletin, LaMotte says, “You know what changes the world? Committees change the world. It’s true. People getting together to figure out what needs to be worked on, who’s going to do what, when we’re going to meet again to make sure we did it. That really is how the world changes.”⁵

James understood that for early Christians, it was tempting to wait for a hero to come and address the very real difficulties of the day – be it economic or social injustice, be it interpersonal disputes, be it family dissension. Yet to be a faithful follower of Christ meant that each person in the community must pick up the mantle of being a “doer of the word.” The word of love. The word of grace. The word of mercy. The word of welcome. The word of justice. Being a “doer of the word” is not easy work, and that is one of the reasons we come together as a community to worship – to pray, to sing, to hear the word of God proclaimed, to be fed at the Table with our siblings, and to be sent out to serve as Christ’s body in the world. Join me in prayer.

⁴ I appreciate the commentary of Ginna Bairby in the *Presbyterian Outlook* for this perspective. Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost — September 1, 2024; <https://pres-outlook.org/2024/08/fifteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-september-1-2024/>

⁵Why Heroes Don’t Change the World <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDHrgQ5NmI4>