

Pentecost 14-B  
8/29/21 CTK

*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

Last week Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services held a webinar about the crisis in Afghanistan among American citizens and soldiers in the Afghan army as well as interpreters and guides, basically anyone who worked for or helped the US during the 20 years of war there and whose lives are now at risk.

LIRS has been providing relief for refugees and displaced persons since WWII. Now they are gathering volunteers to meet refugees from Afghanistan in airports in some of the big cities where the flow is strongest: Texas, DC, Washington State and to help provide basic services. Here in the midlands of SC it's hard to think about how we can help, we are so many levels away from the people who really need help. LIRS are working hard on our behalf to involve us as much as possible and provide volunteer opportunities. Obviously, financial donations are welcome and are the quickest and simplest way to help for those who are able.

The folks at LIRS believe strongly that people of faith cannot turn away from this crisis. That is part of who we are as Lutherans and part of who the church has been since its beginnings.

And right on time this morning, all our readings from scripture are about doing the right thing, and not just doing the right thing but doing the right thing for the right reasons.

I'll bet you haven't heard too many sermons in Lutheran churches about the Epistle of James. As you know, brother Martin Luther was not a big fan of the epistle. In his own German translation of the bible he put James way at the back, along with a couple of other books of which he was not too fond. He told the pastors of the reformed churches not to teach James in their schools. He called it "an epistle of straw."

We're not sure if the writer we call James was James the apostle, or James the brother of our Lord, who was the bishop of the church in Jerusalem in the first century, one of the first Christian martyrs, or some other James. But whoever he was, he wrote this epistle to the first century churches of the diaspora because he was sick and tired of watching people who were supposed to be Christians neglect weakest and most vulnerable among us - in the shorthand of the day, widows and orphans. His message was: let's get to work and do the right thing!

James apparently was disturbed by seeing congregations, for example, giving seats of honor to people who wore gold rings and fine clothes but then when the poor folks showed up, they snubbed them and told them to go and sit in the corner somewhere. So we get a glimpse here of some of the problems that have existed from the very earliest days of the church. James saw people who said all the right things on Sunday morning, but during the week it all went out the window and they were perfectly ready to use the same tongue to give an unbridled lashing to some unfortunate soul.

Today we might say that James was talking about what Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century called “cheap grace.” In Bonhoeffer’s case it was the church of the 1930’s and 40’s turning their backs on victims of the Holocaust in Europe because, well, we are saved by our faith in God’s grace - this was the Reformation’s great contribution to the church - so we can turn our backs on the sin and suffering in the world because we are saved by our faith. This attitude was of course unspoken, even subconscious, but nevertheless, it was and is a very real danger.

In a later era, Martin Luther King, in his Letter from Birmingham Jail takes northern clergy to task, saying “the greatest threat to freedom is not the KKK, but the moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice.” Advocating patience and decorum instead of doing the right thing.

James tells the churches that if we want to be faithful, we have to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers of the word. Doers, not just hearers of the word of God’s endless grace and mercy and love through the Son Jesus Christ. And that, and I paraphrase, sometimes we may have to let go of some of the order in our lives for the sake of justice.

Martin Luther had problems with James because he thought James was contradicting teaching of the great apostle Paul of justification by grace through faith. Come came from a different place than did James. Paul, for his part, was sick of hearing people say that *all that mattered* was doing good works, specifically works of the laws of Judaism. That you had to jump through hoops in order earn God’s grace. For Paul, our faith in Jesus, our acceptance of God’s free grace, is the source of our salvation.

Of course we know, and I believe both Paul and James knew, that faith and works go hand in hand. To focus on one and not the other is to create a false dichotomy, and worse causes us to lose track of what salvation is, not just for us as individuals

but for the world. Surely Paul and James both knew that we do not do good works in order to be saved; we do good works *because* we are saved. We do good works out of gratitude to God for God's grace and love and mercy. That's salvation. For Paul, it was "We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." For James, it was "Show me your faith without works and by my works I will show you my faith."

In Jesus these two truths come together, in a culture which was obsessed with doing the works of the law – in today's gospel the example was ritual handwashing - and had lost touch with faith in the grace of God. Jesus was born into a world that was obsessed by keeping order at the expense of justice. Jesus came to upset that order once and for all; to turn things on their heads. To bless the meek and the suffering, to bring hope to those who mourned, freedom to the captive, and mercy to those who were persecuted. To live his relationship with God the Father.

That was Jesus' work, and it has been the work of his followers ever since. Not in a vain attempt to win God's favor, which we already have through the cross of Christ. But to live our faith, in a world that continues to struggle with the chaos of sin.

Amen.