

“God’s Implanted Word”

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13, James 1: 17-27

13th Sunday after Pentecost/B, September 3, 2006

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I tried a new brand of granola cereal last week. I remember seeing a story about it on the Food Network a few months ago. The cereal is called “Bare Naked Granola” and it is a “made in Connecticut” product. A couple of twenty-something recent college graduates began selling their homemade granola cereal at a farmer’s market. It was a hit and they soon found themselves running a multi million-dollar business. Something on the back of the package caught my eye. It said, “the bare-naked truth” with an arrow pointing to the nutritional information. “The bare naked truth.” Now there is something we sorely need, but too often seems to be in short supply these days.

Truth is a theme that runs through the epistle lessons we have heard in recent weeks. Not long ago Paul reminded us how essential it is to speak the truth in love. Truth is the cornerstone of any faithful community. None of our relationships can survive if we are not willing or able to speak and hear the truth. Today James teaches us that it is not enough simply to know the truth or even to speak the truth, but we must also embody the truth, live the truth. We are to be as James says not only hearers of the word, of God’s truth, but doers of the word.

Scholars have characterized the letter of James as a kind of Christian wisdom literature. He makes little mention of Jesus, but offers many exhortations on how to live in faithful community. What the letter of James professes seems painfully obvious, however it is sometimes the most simple and obvious things that are the most difficult to do. There is a saying; “I would rather see a sermon than hear one.” It is not unlike another that says, “preach the gospel, if necessary use words.” This is strikingly similar to what we hear from James when he says “be doers of the word and not hearers only.”

James is full of pithy little statements that seem too obvious to be true wisdom. They sound more like advice your mother might give. “Every good gift is from heaven,” (v 17) “be swift to listen, slow to speak,” (v 19) “lay aside filthiness and wickedness,” (v 21) “be doers of the word and not

hearers only.” (V 22) Just because something appears obvious does not mean it does not speak the truth. Why is it that when something seems like a “no brainer” as my kids might say we are quick to dismiss it?

“Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves,” is the theme of the letter of James. Many scholars criticize James. In fact, Martin Luther called James an epistle of straw, about as much help as a bundle of straw to a struggling Christian. I suppose there are some people who think that scripture isn’t worth its salt unless it takes hundreds of pages of commentary to comprehend it. I however, am not one of them.

What inhibits us from being doers of the word, as we know we ought to be? What keeps *you* from putting your faith into action? Perhaps you think you don’t have the time. Perhaps you don’t know where to start. Perhaps you don’t think you can make a difference. Perhaps you expect too much of yourself. I have found that it is really much easier than we think to be doers of the word. I have also discovered that the worries, distractions, and temptations of the world so often get in the way.

What intrigues me about this passage is the last statement James makes. He instructs us to care for the widows and orphans who are in need. But he also warns us to “keep oneself unstained by the world.” Friends, this is what keeps us from being doers of the word. The world lurks in the shadows, ready to divert our attention and change our priorities. The world is loaded with forces competing for our attention. There is that painfully persistent voice within us that drowns out the voice of God insisting that we live by the world’s expectations instead of God’s. When we pay attention to that voice, or reluctantly respond to the invitation to help others, when we fail to acknowledge God as the true source of every good gift we become stained by the world.

The voices that compete with the voice of God come at us from many different sources; print, television, cyberspace, and radio. Many of you may have noticed that the local public radio station recently changed its programming format. It now broadcasts very little music and hour after hour of news and current event talk programming. At first I thought I would enjoy this change. After all, NPR’s programming would likely be a welcome alternative to what one typically finds on talk radio stations. After a few weeks of this I think I miss the music. After hours of listening to so called experts talk and debate about current events, it becomes like the teacher in

the famous Peanuts cartoon. You remember what she sounded like, “wahh, wahh, wahh, wahhh, wahh, wah, wha....Our souls need a healthy balance of music and talk.

James says, “Keep yourself unstained by the world.” How in the world do we do that? We do that in part by being active in a faith community. I believe it would be a whole lot more challenging to be unstained by the world if we didn’t have the church. There used to be a time when everyone went to church, not only on Sunday morning, but back again on Sunday night and sometimes on another evening during the week. Church was an essential and integral part of a family’s life. There were no compromises made for soccer tournaments or sleep over parties. Parents knew that without the help of a faith community it would be much more difficult to raise children who would act morally and ethically in the world. They could count on the church. Their pastor was their ally, the Sunday school teacher was in on the plan. Today it feels as though we are fighting a losing battle.

Keep yourselves unstained by the world. James gives us some clues how we might do this in today’s lesson. He tells us to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” Being a good listener is an acquired skill. The world does not reward you for being good listeners. The world gives you gold stars for getting the right answer. It is hard to be patient long enough to listen, to refrain from offering advice or sharing our own experience. We are not used to inviting someone else to speak his or her truth without discounting it, trying to fix or change it.

James says, be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” More listening and less speaking leads to more loving is what James seems to be teaching us because thoughtful listening may then minimize our anger. When we are angry we can not hear the truth that our brother or sister offers. When we are angry we can not respond in love to the great gifts that God has given to us. When we are angry and concerned only with being right, we can not create the kind of loving community that is essential to be doers of the word.

Becoming a good listener is not easy. We fill our world with sound of one kind or another, music, talk radio, television, computers that talk, ipods that fill our heads with constant chatter, hands free cell phones that allow us to talk anywhere we’d like. Silence feels uncomfortable. With our minds so

full of chatter, it is not always easy to truly listen to what is being said. We have also become a society that thinks it needs to talk everywhere and anywhere we please, in the grocery store, while driving the car, at the Movie Theater, in a restaurant. The boundaries between public and private space seem to no longer exist when it comes to personal communication. Our needs, wants and desires seem to easily override the needs of others. James insists that we can only understand true discipleship when we put our own needs aside long enough to satisfy the needs of others. In fact, we meet Christ when we listen to each other, when we understand that someone else has as much to say as we think we do, when we trust that someone may share the very wisdom in their story that I need to hear.

For James the church exists to be engaged in public life, not simply to provide inspiring worship on Sunday morning that makes us feel good, but worship that both glorifies God and empowers us to be at work in the world. The fact that you belong to a church shouldn't be your best-kept secret. Someone once said, the truly wise, truly faithful individual is known not by what they say they believe, but in how they live it. After all, according to Eugene Peterson, "wisdom is not primarily knowing the truth, although it certainly includes that, it is a skill in living. For what good is truth if we don't know how to live it?" (Introduction to James in *The Message*.)

Some people think of church as a filling station. They think "I come here empty, and during the service I get filled up so I can make it through the week." Sound familiar? This is a passive, receptive, and inactive approach to discipleship. It makes church into a place where you come, sit back, and say, "ok preacher, choir, organist, do it to me, fill me up." The mark of good worship, of a good church, is not what we do here, during this hour of worship. It's what we do outside these doors the rest of the week. The mark of a good church is seeing its members engaged in ministry throughout the community.

Sometimes the naked truth is the simplest truth. Be doers of the word and not merely hearers. Who could argue with that? Our challenge is to discern the truth, to separate what is of the world and what comes from God. Our challenge is to prepare ourselves to be fertile ground, weeding out anger, resentment and self-righteousness so that the implanted word that has the power to save your souls, as James puts it, can take root within us. Truth may be easy to understand yet difficult to live. Perhaps this is what makes it

the naked truth. With God as our guardian and giver of all good gifts, may we become doers of the word this day and every day! Amen

Invitation to communion:

Communion Prayer:

We praise and thank you, God because you are loving and just

You treat all people with fairness.

You challenge us to do the same.

You care for all your people even those who feel unfit, unloved, or unlovable.

When we feel that we –or others—do not deserve even your leftovers,

You invite us to a feast.

You sent your child Jesus to be our friend, to heal the hurting

And bring new life to the hopeless.

He taught us to love one another, challenging us to be open

To new ways of seeing, hearing, and living your love.

And so with your faithful people in all times and places,

We gather at your table to pray together the prayer Jesus taught his disciples saying...

Our father...

Even when the world rejected Jesus—on the very night he was betrayed—

He continued to feed others.

He sat with his friends took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them saying, “this is my body, given for you.”

Open us, and feed us, O God.

After supper, he took a cup of wine,

Offered you thanks

And gave it to his disciples saying,

“This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sin.

Whenever you share this cup, remember me.”

Open us, and feed us, O God.

The church in all times and places

Continues to share this meal,

Remembering, dear God, how much you love us.

Send your Holy Spirit upon this meal, and upon us,

That we may be fed by your love and your word,

And go from this place refreshed and renewed by your spirit. Amen