

Lectionary 22B [Pr17]
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
Aug 29, 2021

Deut 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mk 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

You will remember that we are in the second half of the liturgical year, a year that begins with Advent in the late fall. The first half of the year is sometimes called the “season of incarnation” and it includes the many milestones of Jesus’ life – his birth, his baptism, his transfiguration. His entry into Jerusalem the last time, his passion and death, his resurrection and ascension. The second half of the year is called the “season of discipleship.” In this season we look at the many stories of Jesus’ ministry – his teachings and healings, his restoration of life, confrontations with the religious leaders of the time. And in looking at these stories, we learn of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple. Even today, even those of us who did not witness these events personally. Yet, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the waters of our baptisms, we are called as followers, as disciples of this one around whom time is marked, this one whose life and death and resurrection changed everything.

A few years ago, a book titled “Power Surge” was popular and used in many Bible studies. The author, Pastor Foss, considered Christian discipleship. And he contrasted that with “membership.” Discipleship and Membership. We may use these words interchangeably in the church yet I think there are some significant distinctions to be drawn. Think about membership in a church and membership in a gym or fitness center – at a gym one is granted membership status, pays their dues, performs basic perfunctory tasks to maintain membership, follows the gym rules and in exchange is able to come and use the facilities, might have a locker in which to place their personal possessions while they are there. There will be trained staff to help them meet their needs at the gym. They might be given a guest pass a couple of times a year to invite their friends to join them at the gym – maybe they too will want to become a member. The focus in this model is on the member, their wishes, their desires – because as we learned in the American Express commercials of days gone by, “membership has its privileges.”

On the other hand is discipleship – Discipleship, unlike membership, doesn’t have privileges. Jesus said, “Go, and make disciples (not church members) of all nations – baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The life of the disciple is active and engaging – spiritual practices such as prayer and worship and generous giving are a part of the individual’s life; the disciple seeks out ways to bring the good news of Jesus to the world around them. They carefully consider and evaluate the spiritual resources within them and how those can be used for the kingdom. Disciples are doers of the word. While membership has privileges, discipleship has responsibilities.

The text for our consideration today is these words from the Letter of James: Be doers of the word, and not hearers only. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit

orphans and widows in their affliction. Religion that is pure is summed up in this – be with others in their affliction, their weaknesses, their troubles. Be with. Be present with.

I hear these words and they trouble me. They bother me. And I long to jump to Dr. Luther's disdain for the Letter of James. He thought it had no place in the canon, the Holy Scriptures, because it so clearly addressed the works of a Christian. And Dr. Luther saw that as contrary to the key tenet of Lutheran Christianity – that we are justified by grace through faith alone; not of works lest anyone should boast. So, what then do we do with these words of Scripture?

The words of our Gospel reading today can help us. Jesus was engaged in a confrontation with the religious leaders, the religious insiders, those who were in synagogue every Saturday, kept Shabbat every Friday at sundown, whose young ones faithfully prepared for their bar mitzvahs; those who knew the Torah and knew how to keep it. Those who knew the legacy of their faith handed down from past generations. Leaders who followed the law, sincerely followed what they knew to be true and faithful living. And then questioning why Jesus' disciples did not. At issue was the practice of washing one's hands before eating as well as keeping other aspects of Torah, including ceremonial and purity laws.

In Jesus' time, Torah was served not only as a guide for how the community of the faithful live together but also as demarcation between that community of faith and the rest of the world around them, a world subjected to Roman occupation, a world whose ways did not comport with Torah. And so it was that keeping Torah was bearing witness to Jewish life and faithfulness in a hostile world.

And in today's account, Jesus' words put a spotlight on the fact that too often the faithfulness then and even now, commitment to the traditions and practices of the faithful, too often this can create barriers and boundaries that Jesus busted through time and time again. Sometimes the very thing that helps define us becomes perverted when it works to separate us from the people and the world God so tenderly and persistently loves. That is what happened to the Pharisees and the scribes in today's reading – they were so focused on the extremes of faithfulness that they neglected an examination of their hearts.

Like the early church, we too as a community of faith are called not only to hear the word, hear the good news on Sunday morning; we each individually and collectively are called to be doers of the word consistently throughout our life together. And we express this in our mission statement – to share God's love with each, the community and the world. And I believe that our service to others and to our community is commendable and provides a solid witness of the love of God in Christ.

My friends, nothing we do can merit God's grace and favor; instead we believe that God has given it to us in Jesus Christ and receive it by faith. But if we truly believe and trust in the one who sacrificially served us, it changes us into people who sacrificially serve God and our neighbors. If we say "I believe in Jesus" but it doesn't affect the way we live, the answer is not that we need to add hard work to our faith so much as that we haven't truly understood or believed in Jesus at all." Life as a disciple changes things, changes us.

Now, I have no illusions that this discipleship road we walk is an easy one. Not at all. That is why we come together every Sunday to hear the word of God, the Good News in Christ proclaimed, to sing and offer praise together to the God who made us and all that is, both seen and unseen. We come to remember that we are the baptized people of God. We come to be

nourished at the Holy Table – not to hold all of this tightly as a prized possession but to offer and share it openly with the world that needs it so. True religion, real discipleship, pure and undefiled is this – that we visit the orphan and the widow, those in greatest need. That we are not merely hearers but also doers of the word.

We come so that we may be sent, in the name of Christ. Amen.