

DON'T JUST LISTEN, BELIEVE AND LIVE LIKE YOU BELIEVE

Proper 17B

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Wow, I thought when I read the epistle and Gospel for this week. If ever the Bible spoke to me, it did through these two passages. Wow I thought do we as a community, nation and world need to hear and examine these words! Wow, how do I begin to unpack all that is in these two passages? My homiletics professor always warned us not to do two passages in one sermon, but these two are so closely linked and interrelated, I do not begin to have a clue how to pull them apart.

Part of this thought process involved a conversation I had this week with Tim McCarthy from the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy. He came to me with the request to use our parish hall in a couple weeks for a forum on health care. He said, "Mark there is so much bad information out there, so much fear and so much anger we are trying to have forums all over Virginia where we can cool the rhetoric and examine the problem. Would St. Aidan's be willing to host a forum in the Tidewater area?" Now Tim is the same person who brought the Tibetan Monks here a few weeks ago for what I hear was a fascinating program. I missed that because I was out of town on vacation. He has found us to be a place where calm discussions can take place.

So you see the words from James where he says, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." were already resonating with me. I am not going to speak about the health care reform from the pulpit, that is not the place, but I am speaking about the manner in which so much of our public debate is conducted today. There is plenty of precedence to speak of the biblical imperative to care for the sick and disadvantaged. If there is one thing Jesus was clear about it is this. And I certainly see on an almost daily basis the impact that lack of adequate medical on the poor in our community. However we cannot listen when we are all shouting at each other. We also cannot listen to God when we are shouting. That is what I am so concerned about and what I believe James addresses in this passage.

There is more here than just this portion of the passage. This James passage is at the heart of the prayer I say before every sermon. Gracious and loving God, so over-rule my words that your words may be heard and being heard may be believed and being believed may be lived. This is the essence of the "be doers of the word not merely hearers of the word." If we hear God and read, mark and inwardly digest the word of God we must be changed. We must act in accordance to that word.

This is where our gospel comes in. Jesus is not criticizing the Jewish faith, or the adherence to the law, but is criticizing those who only appear to follow the law. These Pharisees have not undergone any change of heart. They only appear to be faithful.

The challenge is that many of the godless in today's world are godless because of people who claim to be God-fearing people. Let me explain what I mean. I have been asked and agreed to serve on the Board of Trustees for Seton House. (An organization that provides emergency housing for teens.) Now because they accept government funds the direct involvement of a church in their work is a challenge. The bigger challenge though comes from some of the children themselves. In talking with Paul, the director and some of the caseworkers, there is a significant portion of that population that wants nothing to do with religion. Why? Because they have been hurt in so many ways by people claiming to be doing God's will. It may be a father who spouts spare the rod and spoil the child as they beat the daylights out of the teen or one who takes the kids to church every Sunday, tells them to honor their mother and father all the while abusing them the rest of the week. Is it any wonder that these children fear the church as an institution? Repairing that damage is a daunting task. It is also why our involvement with them is critical.

We see our modern day Pharisees all around us. The media in particular love to play up this element. Just look at the sex scandals of the summer that have tripped up those on both sides of the political spectrum. This is particularly painful when these same politicians are claiming to be for "biblical family values." Well maybe they are if we are talking about King David, but that is not an example of good family life that I want to hold up. There was a very good article about this in regards to John Ensign and Mark Sanford in this month's Sojourners magazine.

One of the challenges in reaching out to young people who have been turned off about church is that this generation in particular has a very good sense of when they are talking to a modern day Pharisee. They have an uncanny ability to see through the act and see into the heart. To attract these young adults and to retain our children we must be doers of the word, and not just hearers.

A friend of mine was out front of his church one Sunday welcoming worshippers in. A young man walked up to him, pointed to the sign and said, "Do you mean it?" Puzzled he said, "Mean what?" " Your sign says the Episcopal Church Welcomes You," he said. "Do you really welcome me?" Now what the exact nature of this issue of rejection for this young man is unimportant. The point was he was calling my friend to back up in actions what we as a church say on our sign. Do we really mean what we say on our sign out on Little Neck or do we hang qualifiers underneath that are invisible as you drive by, but become visible when someone walks in the church. The un-churched today have an excellent sense of this.

Those qualifiers are also very subtle at times. Stephanie Spellers in her book about radical welcome breaks down the various types of churches. There are the club churches that say welcome in unless you are and then fill in the blank. There are inclusive churches which say, come on in as long as you don't disrupt what we are doing and become just like us.

Then there are radically welcoming churches that say, come on in and let's see what you can add to our life. You don't have to become just like us, but how can you enrich us.

The sad truth is that many of the un-churched are un-churched because they have been so badly wounded by people who say one thing and then do the other. They are quick to criticize others yet, all the while, these same people are claiming to be model Christians.

This is what makes it a challenge at times to walk around town dressed the way I do. It also makes for some interesting driving experiences. By the way the slow to anger part can be very hard as I sit in my car while some idiot cuts me off or does something stupid and I have to remind myself that yes indeed I am sitting there in a black shirt and a collar with St. Aidan's on my license plate. I remember early in my ministry going to the diocesan offices in Boston. I was going there to meet my new bishop, but I was nervous about riding the Boston subway in full clericals that summer of 2004. The priest sex scandal in the Roman Catholic Church was still front-page news and most people don't have a clue about the different collars. I had heard stories about the abuse clergy had taken on the streets from angry people. People angry at the actions of a small group of priests who were just what Jesus talked about.

So I have a daily challenge to live into this message from James and from Mark. So I leave you with a thought. How would you change your actions, your way of being if like me, you walked around town all day dressed in clothes that proclaim I represent God, Jesus and the Christian faith to the world. What would have to change if you really tried to live according to the last words of James?

Message translation: "Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world."¹

So do you act as if you only hear the word or are you a doer of the word?

¹ Translation taken from the Message by Eugene Peterson