

## AUTHENTIC FAITH

### Pentecost 14 – Cycle B: James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Some years ago, Paul Bosch explained at the annual meeting of the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary Women's Auxiliary that when he had been the campus pastor at WLU and UW, it was as if he were in sales – on the front line, so to speak, with students, helping them make faith connections through their challenging and often confusing years at university. After spending a number of years as Lutheran Campus Pastor, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary invited Paul to join the faculty as a lecturer in the area of liturgy and worship. He told this same gathering of people at the meeting that he had moved from sales into quality control.

As we read the beginning of his letter today at worship, it seems to me that the apostle James has done the same thing. Once he was in sales, and now he is in quality control. Through his epistle, James is revealed as a teacher and a coach, helping his disciples and readers move beyond what they have received from Jesus and the Jesus tradition to examine the meaning and implications of what they have received.

Think of a wonderful gift someone has given you: it may not be apparent to you right away how it works. You may need to read instructions before you can use or appreciate it. You may need to spend some time reflecting on what it is you have been given, especially if it is something that has been their lifelong possession and they are now giving it to you: the gift symbolizes a new level of love and trust you may not have recognized as present in your friendship or relationship. When I turned sixteen, my mother gave me her father's pocket watch: it was a keepsake, because she had only dim memories of her father; he died when she was seven years old. But for her, he lived on when I received his pocket watch as my own. It is still his in a sense: it has his initials on it; and, of course, it is old. He died in 1919 during the great influenza epidemic. But I keep it running, have it cleaned from time to time, and have it in my vest pocket when I wear my black suit. The gospel, the word of truth as James calls it, is something like that. At the time you first receive it, its value may not be readily apparent to you.

Similarly, if you receive a book, a video, or a game, you cannot fully appreciate your gift until you read it, watch it, or play it. Several times throughout my life, Barrie Cabena has written a piece of music or a series of pieces for me in token of our friendship: the first thing I have to do when I receive these pieces is learn to play them. When I do so, only then do I begin to grasp what it is that I have received and how this gift creates a deeper and more authentic bond between teacher and student; friend and friend. But like the gospel, music is not something private. When I play Barrie's pieces, others hear them and their lives are enhanced and made more pleasant and enjoyable. That was very much at the heart of why our quartet sang Healey Willan's setting of our the First Reading this morning. Like the gospel, music is meant to be shared.

James is saying something like this to his readers. He tells them it is as if they have been born a second time through the gift of the gospel (which he refers to as "the word of truth"). Their lives have been changed forever by this gift from Jesus because it calls them into a new kind of living – deeper and higher; a kind of living that creates blessing for others, not the harm anger and pride produce. But if they don't learn the music of the gospel, so to speak, if they don't allow it to change them and bless others, the gift is wasted.

He uses the example of an image in a mirror. It is ephemeral, he observes. You can look at yourself in the mirror, but when you look away, the image only exists in memory, and not for long. So it is with the gospel (which he now describes as "the perfect law of liberty"): if it is not applied and shared, if we do not allow it to change us to become people for others, it ceases to exist; it's a nice idea that finds no expression in our world. And so James encourages, urges, goads, provokes, and hounds his readers to "be *doers* of the word, and not merely *hearers*." If Jesus teaches his disciples the power of love, we are called to embody love. If Jesus tells us that peacemakers are the blessed ones, we are to learn how to become peacemakers in our community. When Jesus calls us into solidarity with those who suffer, our next move is to find ways and opportunities to be present with and accompany people who are suffering. James understands that human nature doesn't automatically take us in this direction; hence the pep-talk.

Today's Gospel is somewhat related to James' view, but not directly. Jesus and his disciples are confronted by some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem concerning the disciples not living according to the tradition of the elders. It is easy for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to hear this conversation as an argument for good hygiene; but this is not the concern of the scribes and Pharisees. They place an even higher value on observing the tradition of the elders which, by the way, is not part of the law of Moses. We would probably describe it as a custom that had taken on a religious meaning. We may make the sign of the cross before we pray or receive communion. While Luther did it, it was not a practice rooted in the teachings of Jesus: it is a custom that has taken on religious meaning. The Pharisees' argument on washing everything before a meal was a similar practice.

And Jesus challenges the scribes and Pharisees when they confront him and his disciples. He tells them that such customs are not the things that make them holy, especially if they are ignoring the greater call of the law concerning avoiding destructive social behaviours. It is a long list, he cites, of things people do or feel that result in harm to others. The suggestion is that everyone is guilty of at least something on his list, but they/we choose to focus on a custom or tradition rather than the law. Jesus calls them hypocrites.

These two readings, as earthy and as contextual as they appear, must be allowed into our church, because they are precisely the words of life that we find so easy to ignore. Wallace Bubar, pastor of Overbrook Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia remembers a checklist from his Sunday School envelope when he was a boy. To be a good Christian in his home church which, incidentally, was not Presbyterian, he had to check off each week "worship attended; Bible brought; Bible read daily; Sunday School lesson studied; prayed daily; gave an offering." It is so easy for us, even as adults, to think of these things or these kinds of things as the marks of discipleship. They are not. Disciples of Jesus do these things, but all of these things – worship, reading the Bible, praying, even giving our offering point us beyond themselves into action. Worship is our launching pad: we gather only to be sent again. The goal of reading and studying the Bible is to use it to address and sometimes critique our own situation. Prayer is not an end in itself: it is to lead us into a close relationship with those who are the focus of our prayers. If we pray for peace, we follow up our prayers by becoming involved in peacemaking – learning skills in conflict resolution, mediation, restorative justice; joining Amnesty International; declaring ourselves as pacifists; protesting Canada's shifting military persona from peacekeepers to enforcers.

Giving to our church, Wallace Bubar would say, is part of the greater spirit of generosity to which the gospel calls us. We're not paying our dues, we're seeking to use our gifts for the benefit of others. Supporting our church is a high calling, but it cannot be our only calling.

There is a place in the church for the contemplative life. Last fall, I spent the better part of a week at St. John's Anglican Convent in Toronto: the Liturgy Task Force of the Anglican Church's Faith and Worship Committee met there. Two Lutherans, Anne Norman and Debra Johnston are part of that community. Convents and monasteries are often misunderstood because contemplation, study, theological reflection, and piety are so great a part of each day in the community. They are a world apart, in many ways, from the world we inhabit. But these are communities with a mission. St. John's supports a wonderful rehabilitation hospital which would not exist, had they not started it 75 years ago. They are the largest rehabilitation facility in Toronto. Without this significant contribution of the Sisters of St. John the Divine, health care in Toronto would be much poorer.

James is saying, Jesus is saying, "Have a mission. Be doers of the word, not merely hearers. Both individually and as a church, get busy. Find ways to make faith authentic."