

September 1, 2024 – Pentecost 15

I can't tell you how many times in pastoral ministry, pastors hear something like this: "I try to be a good Christian, pastor." Now there's nothing wrong with the sentiment surely. Often the person is speaking frankly about the challenges that come with growing in the Christian life. Sometimes it's easy. The Holy Spirit draws a particular reoccurring sin to our attention, and having seen it for what it is, we repent of it and let it go. What a joy when that happens.

Far more often however, the matter is more complicated. "That sin, Lord? But I like that sin! I don't want to let it go; in fact, I enjoy it." Have any of you ever said that to the Lord? Would it trouble you to know your pastor has? Or maybe you've said something like this to the Lord: "You're right, Lord. That is a sin and I want to be rid of it. I repent of it and I promise to do my best not to do it again." Wonderful. But then a week goes by. And, as St. Paul wrote in Romans 7, we discover a war within us where we find what feels like an iron law working against our desire to please God. And in spite of ourselves we sin that old sin again. Should believers be sinning? No! "Shall we sin then that God's forgiving grace might abound? God forbid!" Again, that's how St. Paul put it. Struggling with sin, with decades long patterns of behaviour and orientations toward dysfunction is part and parcel of cooperating with God as he, by his Spirit, sanctifies us and prepares us for life with him forever.

When we're talking about struggling with sin, putting it to death so that we might be raised to new life in Christ, "I try to be a good Christian pastor," are the words of a valiant warrior who's taking a pause to catch her breath, before heading back out to battle the devil. They are the words of an athlete who's training is hard but who continues to get up and go after every stumble, running to win the race. They are good words.

And sometimes, as a pastor, I \*hate\* those words. "I try to be a good Christian, pastor," often signals not someone who sometimes struggles with sin on their journey to heaven. Rather, they are the words of someone who is not sure of the basis of their salvation, the basis of their relationship with God. "If I've tried hard enough, pastor, do you think I will have done enough that God will let me into heaven when I die?" These are the words of someone near despair, someone who having worked really hard, fears meeting God the angry Judge, rather than God the merciful Saviour. Worse,

these words sometimes signal despair's opposite sin: pride. "I try to be a good Christian, pastor," are not the words of someone looking for assurance, but someone who's too assured. "Pastor, when you see all that I've done, you'll agree with me that I have worked hard enough. And if you agree with me, then I'm confident I'm good with God, too."

Either way, whether I'm dealing with a situation of despair or pride, I hate those words. Because they are the words of a soul whom God loves, a soul for whom Christ died, a soul whom the Holy Spirit longs to indwell, and a soul who gravely misunderstands the good news of the Gospel. Now let's be clear—they get part of the Gospel. They get very well the part with which our second lesson ends this morning: Religion that is pure and undefiled is this—to care for widows and orphans in distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world. But they've made that part the beginning. And not just the beginning, but the whole thing. And in making this the sum of the Gospel, they've actually ended up losing the Gospel as good news.

Let's press into this further by looking closely at our second lesson.

### **Converted by the Word**

James is a great book at which to think through the role of works in the Christian life. It's very works oriented. James goes so far as to say, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." Now, being good Lutherans, I hope that that verse—taken out of context as I have just done—sets your teeth on edge. Even in context, it rankles Protestants. Martin Luther himself called the Epistle of James an "epistle of straw" and in his reordering of the New Testament books in his German translation of the New Testament, placed James toward the end. It's still canon. It's still Word of God. But, well, it's not Romans!

And yet. . . . James does not teach salvation by our own efforts, driving some to despair and others to pride. On the contrary. Believers are, according to James, reconciled to God according to God's own purpose, **by the word of truth**. We do not convert ourselves by our works. We are converted by the God's Word. **"In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."**

This past week, we celebrated one of the greatest saints in the Christian calendar. He is among the three most important theologians in the Christian West, the others being St. Paul and St. Thomas Aquinas. He is of course St. Augustine. The story of his conversion to Christ is a powerful demonstration of being converted by the word, that James has written about. Do you know the story? He tells it in his autobiography (which is, in fact, one long prayer), the Confessions. The son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, Augustine received some instruction in Christian faith as a youngster, but it didn't take and he was not baptized. He got enough Christianity to believe it was a religion for women and fools. As he grew up, he was a pretty typical Roman North African boy. His parents made sure he went to the best schools. They knew of his problem with womanizing, but refused to marry him off lest it interfere with his education. His education eventually took him to university in Milan and there he began to listen to the preaching of the Bishop, Ambrose. He listened to Ambrose because Ambrose was a master speaker and Augustine was a teacher of public speaking. But eventually, the preaching of Ambrose wore him down and he returned to the Scriptures of his mother.

And he found not a religion for women and fools. Or perhaps better, he found a religion that numbered him, the teacher of rhetoric, among the fools who needed to hear the good news. And he resolved to become a Christian. And do you know what he found? No matter how much he believed in the truth of the faith, and no matter how much he wanted to be a Christian, he could not make himself become one. And he, like many people I've met in ministry, came nearly to despair that the move he knew had to be made for the sake of his soul, would be made.

The climax of this part of Augustine's story takes place in the backyard of his friend Alypius. We find him reading the book of Romans, frustrated that he cannot penetrate the Apostle's prose. Can you see him struggling to understand? To the point that, in tears, he throws the book in frustration and goes back into the house. As much as he wants to be converted, he cannot convert himself. Well, eventually he gathers himself and goes back outside to his book, and as he does he hears a child in the next garden singing to himself, "Take and read." And he does. His eyes fall on Romans 13:13-14-- "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for

the flesh in its lusts." What a strange text! But as Augustine himself put it, "I had no need to read any further!" Grace conquered his heart. And what he could not bring about by his years of study or effort, the Spirit of God accomplished in a nanosecond. Augustine was converted by the Word.

Everyone who is converted is converted by the Word. We may well not have a conversion story as miraculous or beautiful as Augustine's. But we were all converted by the Word. Most of you here were covered by the Word of God spoken over the waters of your baptism, which transformed those waters into the bath of regeneration. You may have never taken that seriously, you may have forgotten it, you may have never been taught to remember or celebrate that. But human foibles cannot nullify the word of God. You are, we all are, converted by God's Word or we are not converted at all. Are you despairing that you haven't worked hard enough to earn God's salvation? Let go of that despair and rest in the Word that converts you. Are you pridefully clinging to your works as though they will somehow impress God? Let go of them before they are exposed as filthy rags. God in his Word claims you as his own; your contribution—which is, of course—not a contribution at all—is to say simply, thank you. God, for his own purposes converted you by his word of truth. Period.

### **Welcoming the Word**

James immediately follows this piece of really good news with practical advice: *"<sup>19</sup>You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."* Focus on the end of verse 21. Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. Your conversion is nothing less and nothing other than God, by his Word, implanting his Word within you. And the first thing we are to do with that word is, simply, welcome it.

We are, in this case, much like the children of Israel in our first lesson. We are on the threshold of the promised Land. We are about to enter the fullness of God's promises to our ancestors and to us. And with Israel, we hear Moses say, "receive these commandments! Don't add to them. Don't take away from them. Learn them. Live them. Remember them. Teach them." Even as Israel

was called to welcome the Word that had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, so we, ingrafted into Israel by the saving work of Jesus, are to welcome the Word that has delivered us from sin, death and the devil. Now, the story of Israel is Christian Scripture. It is our story too. And the story of Israel is one of them \*not\* welcoming the word, or at least not consistently. Periods of welcome were interrupted by sometimes long stretches of forgetting the Word. Of refusing to live by the Word. Of failing to remember and to teach the Word. And that is our story. But the word remains. And the call to welcome the Word remains.

This past June, at our clergy conference, it was our privilege to welcome a Lutheran pastor from, I believe, Ghana. At our last session, she was invited to speak. When she talked about improvements in health and education, we cheered. When she talked about the Ghanaian Lutheran church's move to women's ordination, we cheered louder. When she thanked us for our ongoing financial support, we cheered even more. Then, as I recall, she hit us. Why are your churches empty and our churches are full? Have you forgotten the Word of God? And we did not cheer. It is \*the\* failing of so many churches in the affluent countries of the West that in our wealth, we can afford to forget the Word of God. We can downgrade it on our list of priorities. It comes below vacations. It comes below social clubs. It comes below kids' athletics. It comes even below just sleeping in on a Sunday morning. God may well, for his own purpose, converted us by his Word. But if we have not welcomed that word, we may be free to ask ourselves whether the waters of our baptism were animated by the Word, or if the preacher just spilled some water on our heads.

Are you despairing? Welcome the Word. Are you proud? Welcome the word. And, as James puts it "rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness" that would prevent you from welcoming the word.

### **Doing the Word**

Which gets us to the place where both the despairing and the proud want to begin: doing the word. Hear James again.

*<sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

*<sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>But those who look into the*

*perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. <sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

The Word that converts, when it is welcomed, inevitably leads to action. Luther spoke of believers embracing good works as the inevitable outflow of gratitude in response to the grace of God. I think that is the movement of our New Testament passage this morning. We are, for God's own reasons, brought to new birth by the Word. As we welcome that word implanted in our souls, we are transformed. We begin the slow, joyful and sometimes painful task of being conformed to Christ, a journey that will not end, but will become so much easier once the sins that so easily best us are finally set aside in glory.

James here talks about true religion. Religion that is pure and undefiled. Religion is a good word. Let's keep it. Doing the word, James says, simply is being religious. What does he mean? The contrast between hearing only and doing is, for James, the contrast between false religion and true religion. And the distinction for James is this: true religion is public. It involves action directed toward others. That's good for us to remember. We are tempted in many ways to keep our faith private. And that is natural—it is after all, getting close to the core of who we are, our deepest values, our bedrock convictions. We don't want to parade those around, do we? And yet. . . .

When I was young, religion became a dirty word in the church communities in which I was raised. "I'm not religious. I have a relationship with God." In fact, there was a popular song about it: "I'm not religious! I just love the Lord." was the tagline. We hear it today in similar phrases like "I love Jesus but not the church," or "I'm spiritual, but not religious." In response, I'm reminded of a phrase that I heard attributed to the church historian (and Lutheran) Martin E. Marty: "The difference between spirituality and religion is this: religion won't bring you a casserole when you're sick."

His point is James's point. True religion, pure and undefiled religion in the words of James, is simply the public living out of the faith that comes from being converted by and welcoming the word. It is doing the word.

“I try to be a good Christian, pastor,” Good! Welcome the word that has converted you, allow it to keep on converting you from the inside out. Don't despair at not being good enough. Don't be proud in your accomplishments as though you did them apart from grace. Rather keep on welcoming and doing the word. For the word has the power to save your soul.