

“Doing the Word”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

Pentecost 15B 2018

September 2, 2018

James 1: 17-27 (Mark 7: 1-23)

Yesterday, I did something I hardly ever do—especially on a Saturday. I watched television for over 4 hours. Maybe like some of you, I was watching the funeral service for John McCain. But I started at 8:30 because our daughter Clare was working at it—and I wanted to be connected to what she was doing. I watched the casket leave the Capitol. And then I watched Cindy McCain lay a wreath at the Viet Nam Memorial and then I watched them arrive at the National Cathedral. I really wasn't intending to watch the whole service but, honestly, I just couldn't tear myself away from it.

What came across loud and clear was how John McCain lived his life with integrity and love—and how he was committed to something larger than himself. What more could you want people to say about your life!

But what was equally striking was the call to live that kind of life. In their own way, each speaker passionately urged--not just politicians but ordinary Americans—to follow John McCain's example of living a life in service to the common good.

It was *ethical exhortation* at its finest—just like the Letter of James. Martin Luther hated the Letter of James—he famously called it an epistle of straw. What he hated about this book was that there is no Gospel—no mention of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and the difference that makes for the world.

And Luther is right about that—this is not a book you would hand to someone to evangelize them—to share what the faith is all about. This is a book or a letter to people who are already Christians—it's an in-house document. It's a practical letter about what it means to actually live as a Christian.

Even though Jesus is never actually mentioned in this letter, the whole letter reads a whole lot like the Sermon on the Mount. Setting aside the four Gospels, the letter of James has more thoughts and sayings of Jesus than any other book in the New Testament—with no attributions. James isn't plagiarizing, it's more like he assumes everyone knows that Jesus is the one who said it.

I want to focus our attention on a couple of verses—starting with the second part of verse 21: “Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

*Welcome with meekness the implanted word.* Meek is one of those words we don't use very often except in Christmas carols. It's not a highly sought after characteristic. I don't see a lot of people aspiring to be meek. We may not be power-grabbers but we sure don't want to be meek. Especially in this mean time, being meek seems like an invitation for getting run over.

So, we've got to take a minute with this call to be meek. But this isn't a general call to be a doormat or a person who doesn't think they're worth much. It's talking about the way we

receive the Gospel—the Good News that comes to us through Jesus—that God loves us and wants to share in our lives and give us new life.

When I think about what it means to welcome with meekness the implanted word—what comes to mind is really seeing what’s what. Being open to not understanding fully—being ok with not having all the answers now and maybe ever. Welcoming with meekness is being open to the goodness and graciousness of a God who is so much bigger than we are. It’s that sense of how small we are in comparison to the massive, far-reaching love of God that just makes you open your heart in wonder and awe.

Welcoming that word that has the *power* to save our souls. That’s the paradox. We receive the word with meekness and this word works in us. And this Word gets *implanted in us*—the Spirit of God *is in us*—working in us, working on us—growing us into people who do things we didn’t know we had it in us to do. Growing us into people who are not just hearers of the word but hearers *and doers* of the word.

My husband Paul has been in a struggle with the DC government to recover money they owe us. This has been going on for almost two years. The crazy thing is that no one disputes that they owe us the money, they just wouldn’t sign the check. It is for 6 months of unemployment for Paul and tuition assistance for Clare. We never received the original check and a replacement check needs three signatures.

After a few months of trying to do this on his own, Paul reached out to Council Member David Grosso. One of his aides, a man by the name of Phil, took our case and doggedly kept at it. Phil spent countless hours going around with a woman affectionately known as “the check lady” trying to get the signatures. It is hard to believe the lengths that one of the signers went to to avoid signing.

But Phil kept at it and eventually we brought in the mayor and then a deputy mayor and the day we went on vacation the check was signed. We had already left town, so Phil held on to it.

When we returned, we said that we could come to his office to pick it up, but Phil said no, that he felt that the least he could do—after all of our mistreatment at the hands of city government—was deliver the check to us. He was going to bring the check to us last Friday night—but tragically, he never came.

He had just left the council office, and as he was going through an intersection, a car ran a red light. Phil swerved to try to avoid the car and crashed into a pole. He died.

We were shocked and overcome with so much sadness. And all those thoughts came flooding in about how senseless it was and how could this happen to someone who was so dedicated and selfless and such a good guy—and even if only we had just gone and picked up maybe he would still be alive. When Paul talked to the Council Member he said, “I’m not trying to diminish your experience with Phil but that’s what he did with every constituent he worked with. His role in the office was to take on the really hard cases and stick with them until justice was done.”

After some of the initial horror and shock wore off, I started to see how amazing it was that his life was all about service—public service—and how he actually died as he lived, serving.

And it made me want to do something in response.

So, we're writing a letter to his family—a detailed letter—about how much he helped us, how he never gave up and what a difference that made for us. Council Member Grosso told us his staff was really having a hard time with Phil's death. I offered to be available to anyone who wanted to talk. It's like his life—and his death in the midst of serving—unleashed a power in us to want to do more.

I think this is what James is talking about. The implanted Word—the heart-wrenching, life-altering truth that Jesus loved us to the point of death—when you receive that—when you take that in—it changes how you see yourself, how you see other people. It changes how you live. The value of your life—and even what it means to live—what matters and what doesn't—all of this comes into focus. You receive this word—not just in your ears but into your heart—and you want to live it.

Yesterday, as I was watching the service for John McCain, I kept looking at the people there—2500 of them—most of them political leaders. John McCain planned his own service carefully. In many ways, it was his final word. Looking at all those powerful people, possibly made a little meeker in the face of death, I wondered if they were welcoming this word. I wondered, as we heard about McCain's service to a larger purpose, if those who were listening might be changed—if some of them might become *doers* of the word.

In the Letter of James, we get some very specific directions about what it means to be doers of the word. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Keeping ourselves unstained by the world means not getting sucked in by all of the ways of thinking and acting that don't take God and God's purposes into account.

Caring for widows and orphans is Biblical shorthand for standing with and for the oppressed and vulnerable.

There are so many we could name but I'm thinking particularly about the 500 children who have been literally orphaned by President Trump's policy to separate families at the border. Lawyers and social workers and others are working desperately to try to find these parents who were sent back to their home countries without their children. Can you even imagine?!

I'm also thinking about people of Mexican descent who were born in the border areas of the U.S. who are now being denied passports because their citizenship is being called into question. This sounds eerily like the Nazis' treatment of Jews in Germany.

The ways that we each respond to the harm that is being done in our name may be different. But what James tells us is that responding is not something that is separate from our religious practice. Caring for those who are oppressed, stopping the oppression—is truly living our faith. Doing the word. Empowered by the Word in us.

One of the things we can do right now is pray. In a few minutes, we'll be offering our prayers. Today we are doing it with prayer cards. I invite you to write a prayer that Lisa will read. We'll take a minute in silence and the ushers will pass by to collect them as we start the hymn.