

**September 2, 2018**

**James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23,**

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Beginning next Sunday,

- Lutherans all over the Commonwealth of Virginia and around the country-

- will make time in the midst of their daily lives -

- to intentionally put their faith into action -

- as a part of the ELCA's God's Work, Our Hands project.

-Folks from every walk of life

- will share their time and their talents -

- to make God's love known in their communities - -

- by delivering cookies to first responders,

- assembling health kits for Lutheran World Relief,

- helping out with projects for local mission partners like -

- Lutheran Family Services of Virginia,

- Hungry Mother Lutheran Camp -

- or Grace Inside. -

- People will use their gifts to

- work in yards,

- to paint fences,

- to make homes accessible again. - -

- and share the love of God -

- through their actions. -

Friends and neighbors will follow Jesus' example of compassion and caring

- in visible and tangible ways
  - and discover how the Holy Spirit -
    - can work through them -
      - to make Jesus known.

It will be a flurry of faith in action that -

- probably would have made the author of James extremely happy, - -
  - for as we hear in our reading today from James, chapter 1,
    - James firmly believes that all we have is a gift from God,
      - and that we are called to use those gifts -
        - to be bear the fruit of God's presence and love -
          - in the world.

- "Be doers of the word,

- and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (James 1:22)

- James says.

- Be a visible sign of God's kingdom -

- to your friends and neighbors -

- through your words and decisions.

- Do God's work,

- with your hands -

- so that others may see and give glory to God.

- Respond to the love and forgiveness God has shown us in Christ Jesus

- by using your gifts in God's service in the world.

- Now to be sure,
  - each of us has our own unique gifts.
    - Each of us has different opportunities to serve,
      - so the fruits of our faithfulness -
        - will vary according to our context.
- In fact,
  - we'll see that variety of gifts and service lifted up over the next few weeks -
    - as the stories of the God's Work, Our Hands service projects -
      - are shared in the Synod's weekly e-newsletter, -
        - on church Facebook pages, -
          - and in Instagram posts. -
- Yet regardless of whether you are doing yard work,
  - or baking cookies,
    - or visiting with someone who needs a listening ear,
      - the spirit of God's Work, Our Hands, -
        - like the spirit of James message to us today
          - is to put your faith into action in the world.
- But please notice that
  - nowhere in our conversations about the God's Work, Our Hands project -
    - and nowhere in our reading today from James do we hear anyone say -
      - 'Go and do good works
        - in order to earn God's love and forgiveness.'
- Nowhere in our conversations about the God's Work, Our Hands project -

- and nowhere in our reading today from James do we hear anyone say -

‘Serve God or serve your neighbor

- to gain favor with God.’

For while it is true that we live

- in an extremely transactional culture

- where we often say things like -

- ‘You can’t get something for nothing.’

- or ‘There’s no such thing as a free lunch.’

- or ‘You get what you pay for.’

- the good news for us is that God doesn’t have that same -

- transactional world view. - -

- The good news for us is that God’s love,

- God’s forgiveness,

- God’s mercy

- is given freely,

- not earned. - -

- So when we talk about God’s Work, Our Hands,

- when we talk about being “doers of the word, and not merely hearers,” (James 1:19)

- when we hear James say,

- that we are given

“birth by the word of truth,

- so that we would become a kind of first fruits

- of his creatures.” (James 1:18),

- we are not talking about trying to earn God's love -

- or tally up points to help us get into heaven.

- No,

- when we talk about being “doers of the word, and not merely hearers,” (James 1:19),

- we are talking about responding

- to God's generous compassion with us, -

- to God's generous love for us -

- as a way of giving thanks for all that God has done,

- is doing,

- and promises yet to do for us.

Now contrast that call to respond to God's Word

- by being doers of the Word,

- to the Pharisees desire to be preservers of the Word,

- that we hear described in our reading today from Mark.

- For while James is interested -

- in how we bear the fruit of God's love in our daily lives,

- the Pharisees seem to be so worried about observing all the laws.

- seem to be so focused on the order and the manner

- in which things are to be done,

- so focused on the details,

- that they are losing sight of the meaning

- of the very words

- they are trying to protect.

- Now let's be clear -

- washing your hands before you eat is a good thing,

- but given the suffering and the problems of God's people,

- given the inequality and unfaithfulness of the time,

- given all that Jesus and his disciples have said and done

- as they traveled around the region,

- Worrying about whether or not the disciples washed their hands

- seems a bit trivial,

- doesn't it.

- Instead of looking at Jesus and his disciples

- and focusing on the miracles Jesus has done, -

- like the feeding of the 5000

- or the woman who was healed by touching Jesus' cloak,

- or the man freed from unclean spirits,

- instead of asking about the parables Jesus has shared,

- or asking for clarification of his teachings,

- the Pharisees' focus on whether or not

- Jesus' disciples always wash their hands.

- The Pharisees,

- it appears,

- are so worried about preserving the structures surrounding God's Word,

- so worried about protecting God,

- that they are missing the Word made flesh, -

- missing the Word in action,

- missing the Good News of hope and salvation

- that Jesus is sharing.

- The Pharisees,

- it appears,

- are so worried about preserving the structures surrounding God's Word,

- so worried about protecting God from these upstart new believers that

- they are missing the opportunity to actively participate in Jesus' mission

- to love, bless and save the world.

- They are missing their chance

- to be doers of the word,

and not merely hearers and protectors.

And even though the Pharisees described in Mark are no longer around,

- it's amazing how easy it is for that tendency to be preservers of the Word,

- not doers of the Word -

- to manifest itself in our lives -

- as we try to cope with changing, shifting world we live in.

- It's amazing how easy it is for us

- to fall into those same patterns,

- to find ourselves focus on preserving the structures

- around the Word,

- that we loose sight of the meaning of the Word,

- and almost without realizing it become hearers and protectors,

- instead of servants and evangelists,

- Which is why

- the words of James are just as important for us to hear today -

- as they were for God's people

- 2000 years ago.

- For regardless of whether

- you are participating in a congregationally sponsored

- God's Word, Our Hands project this week or not,

- our reading today from James invites you to

- take some time this week

- to focus on the ways that you can and do

- respond to God's love in your life, - -

- Invites you to take some time this week

- to listen to what you say to those around you,

- to think about the choices you make and

- and what those choices say about what you believe,

- Invites you to look for new ways

- to follow Jesus more closely -

- and to make Jesus known through your life, - -

- so that others might see through your words and actions

- that "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift,

- is from above." (James 1:17)