

“Faith and Works: Hearers and Doers”—James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 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.

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. 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. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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 Moravians were a sect of German Pietists who were, for a time, very influential in the life of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Wesley admired their devotion to prayer and Scripture, their close fellowship, their attitude of servanthood toward others. On the crossing from England to Georgia, the ship which was carrying Wesley, a group of Moravians, and others encountered a fierce storm that threw everyone into a panic—everyone, that is, except the Moravians, who faced the peril with great calmness and assurance—a calmness and assurance that impressed Wesley greatly. And it was from the Moravians that Wesley borrowed and adapted the idea of the “bands”—what we would call today small accountability groups—that became one of the hallmarks of early Methodism.

Yet Wesley later fell out with the Moravians. Why? He considered them “quietists”—as he saw them, the Moravians prayed and studied and met, but they never moved out into the mission and ministry of doing good to people’s souls and bodies. From Wesley’s perspective, the Moravians, to use some words from this Letter of James, kept themselves “unstained from the world,” but they didn’t keep the other part of what James calls “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father”—they didn’t minister to the widows and orphans and people in distress. From Wesley’s point of view, the Moravians were “hearers of the word and not doers.”

Now, I'll grant you that Wesley was probably a little harsh with the Moravians—he tended to be harsh with those with whom he disagreed—but he was even harsher with himself when he contemplated his own life and practice. Yet his point, I believe, is valid even today—that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father” is more than just sitting and soaking up all sorts of spirituality; it's more than just reading and studying and praying; it's more than the mere morality of keeping ourselves “unstained from the world.” These are important, to be sure, but there's more—“religion that is pure and undefiled” also summons us to get outside of ourselves, to meet the needs of those “in their distress,” both within and beyond the walls of the church, within and beyond the boundaries of the community of faith.

Now, what might that look like for this community of faith, for those of us who gather here at Bainbridge First United Methodist Church? It's a question I've asked before, and there are other questions that go with it, questions such as: What can we do to truly deal with those who are hungry here in Bainbridge other than hand out a bag of food each week? What can we do to break the cycle of “toxic charity,” charity that ensnares people and families for generations as they learn to become dependent on it? During this month, our Missions Team will be leading us in focusing on The Methodist Home for Children and Youth, a ministry we all love—but while we're ministering to the children and youth of The Home, what can we do for the children and youth of our community? What can we do to help our “seasoned adults”—not just within our congregation, but outside of it as well? How can we, as our Second General Rule puts it, “do all the good [we] can,” not just to people's souls, but to their bodies—to their physical and emotional needs—as well?

I've asked these questions before—I'm still struggling to find the answers. But this much I do know—that if we're to be doers of the Word and more than just hearers, we've got to find ways of meeting the needs of those around us.

I have no problem with spending a lot of time in prayer—I've spent the last few weeks urging you many times not just to pray, but to pray without ceasing, to embrace the life of prayer. I hope you will spend much time in the Word of God—study the Scriptures on your own; study the Bible in groups. John Wesley, our founder, would encourage us to worship as often as we can and especially to share in this Sacrament of Holy Communion as frequently as possible. And, of course, who could object to living the moral life—keeping oneself “unstained by the world,” as James puts it? But that's not all there is to religion—we're called to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. We're called to move beyond what some call works of piety—prayer and worship and study. We're called to move beyond mere morality—just being good. We're called to reach out beyond ourselves to meet the needs of others, to embrace what some call works of mercy, just as Jesus

did—we're called to be imitators of the One who told us he came not to be served but to serve. When we start imitating Jesus, we're moving beyond just hearing to becoming doers of the Word.

Dear God, let it be so for all of us!