

James 1:16-27

## Doing the Word

I am delighted to be back with you, back in the pulpit. From all I have heard about the guest preaching, it is a good thing I was only away for two Sundays, or you might have forgotten me entirely. I do want to say “thank you” to Bill Muske and to Mylessa, who preached so effectively, and to Sharon who performed my other Sunday morning labors. Well, really, I am not so insecure to think you would forget me in two short weeks, and besides, I have a key- you can’t very easily keep me out of the building! but I truly am glad to be back because I missed you. It is not only that I have missed preaching to you, speaking words and more words every Sunday, but I missed you, because of what you are. Here at First Christian we do not merely hear and speak the word of good news, but we *live* it: I heard how much you contributed to Apple Tree earlier this month. I have known about you for some time now, in particular since last fall and the food drive for Helping Hands, when our little church gave more than any other church in town. And now, you have provided over \$1,000 in cash and clothing and supplies for the students of our city- and this coming right in the midst of the work to refurbish the kitchen, and your generosity in completing that task. It is really a pretty kitchen, isn’t it? and will be much more efficient and easier to use. See, now here is what I like

most about you: you are not just nice people, but these drives and contributions that we take part in are one way we fulfill the blessing and demand of the gospel, what our passage in James calls “pure religion”; that is, helping to take care of those who need our help. And the remade kitchen is not simply a shiny new plaything, but a way to minister better to our community. You have shown that this is how we worship- not just with the words we hear or speak or sing on Sunday mornings, but *the word we do*, the hope and love that lives in us and that we pass along to others by our actions, and even by our monetary sacrifices.

Let me tell you another reason I am glad to be here this morning. It is because I haven't preached the past two weeks, and I need to preach. You see, during my vacation I got out of town a bit, visited with some friends, ate a lot of Mexican food (Fortunately I can do that just as well when I'm on the job!), and I read, murder mysteries, but also some helpful and thought provoking non-fiction. Reading is fun for me, I think you know that about me, but I also learn- from everything I read, even if it is only a mystery novel. And as your minister, as your brother in Christ, I must be able to tell you what I have learned. When we share what we know, when we share what we have learned about the world around us and about people, if we have learned something about compassion and forgiveness,

if we have learned about the love of Jesus the Lord, we must strive to tell that. It is not always easy, but learning to speak may be still another way we do the word.

This passage is the same scripture I preached from for my Senior Sermon at Seminary, all those years ago. Let me tell you, I was nervous that day- and all the days leading up to it; I knew my professors would be there in the chapel on campus. How could I say something meaningful or even interesting to people so much smarter than I? How could I avoid saying something trite to them? Today I am not really nervous (and not because I don't think you aren't smart, but I am a bit more experienced), but the challenge is always present: how do I say something helpful or meaningful to you, so it is not just words, words, words you hear, but a word you can do? A word that teaches perhaps, or inspires, or maybe a word that becomes part of you. It is really a challenge for all of us- speaker and hearers- so that we become people who exhibit the gospel of our Lord in our words and our actions.

There is only one part of that sermon I remember. It's an example I used about a water fountain that looked like any other drinking fountain, a square box mounted on the wall, a little refrigerator motor you could hear turn on every so often, but when you pressed the button, just a tiny little trickle of water flowed out

so that you couldn't drink from it. In the sermon I called this fountain "a lie" because it didn't do what it was supposed to do, did not produce what its appearance promised. I think we should relate this fountain to our Christian life. Do we perform what our name promises, as followers of Christ? Or do we merely sound like Christians, look like Christians, while inside we are dry fountains? Sometimes we may be like a lying water fountain; we may look and sound right, but the doing isn't right. The image in our passage is that of looking in a mirror, turning away, and then forgetting what we look like. It may be a difficult image to understand because how could we forget what we look like? Perhaps we should think of it like this: that we look inside ourselves, into our hearts or souls or minds, and then we turn away- look outward toward the world, where words must become actions- and we forget what we are for, forget our purpose. We may think we know certain things about ourselves and the meaning of our life, but it is easy to lose concentration, so easy to be fooled, and we know that we have a great ability to deceive ourselves about what we really are; so ready to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt if we don't do right. The Christian life can be very demanding. It is about "pure religion," caring for others, and that sometimes requires sacrifice, and not getting our way, forgiving, going the second mile,

turning the other cheek, loving our enemies. If we need help comprehending the meaning here, to learn how to look inside and then turn away and not forget, let's take note of a second word translated "to look," in verse 25. It is the same Greek word we find in the gospels that describes the disciples looking into the empty tomb of Jesus that resurrection morning. It seems to me that's not an accidental use of the word; the meaning here is that to discover the truth about ourselves and to avoid the lies, the self-delusions, and the deceptions that some religions may want to convince us of, is to keep looking into the empty tomb. To keep eyes focused upon the Lord who died and then became Master of death; founding our vision and our words and our deeds upon the kind of love that has gone forward to the cross. Seeing that love and acting upon that love is what it means to do the word.

Perhaps we need to ask what is this "word"? A helpful commentary on our passage today might be the Sermon on the Mount, and the words of Jesus, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father." Simply, the "word" is God's will, but with many meanings: God's commandments, but also his compassion and perfect love, his

eternal purpose for us, his desire for us. Jesus is called the “Word” in John’s gospel; and all through the Old Testament we can read the “Word of the Lord” that God spoke to his people through the prophets, the Word that is both command and mercy. Throughout God’s history with his people, *God has been doing the word*, not just speaking it, but coming to us, putting within our hearts his love and forgiveness, showing the word of love in the lives of our brothers and sisters and in the life and death of his Son, and displaying his word of power when he raised Jesus the Lord from the grave. “Word” is the correct term, for we can see that God wants to communicate with us, wants a relationship with us. He keeps coming, he keeps calling to us, he opens his great heart to us, and so, bids us to open our lives to receive his grace, and to open our hearts to give mercy to those about us. That is doing the word.