

Year B, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

August 29, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“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.”

That’s good, isn’t it? “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” That’s another great line. And then there is his best, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of this letter, “...faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” You gotta love St. James’ epistle.

Do you know who didn’t love it? Martin Luther. He called it the “Epistle of Straw.” His stated reason was more or less that it wasn’t Christological enough. It focused more on *how* to live and less on *why* in relation to Jesus. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it did annoy Luther and probably for slightly more personal, ego related reasons. What were his two biggest catch phrases? Hint, one of them was *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture alone. By this Luther meant that scripture is the source of authoritative access to God. (That was the original protestant counterpoint to the Magisterium of *the Church* as the source of religious authority). What was the other? It is apropos to James? \_\_\_\_\_ faith alone; or we are saved by faith not by works. That doesn’t jive very well with a scriptural statement like “...faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” does it? Not on the surface it doesn’t.

Now Luther did not mean, as too many of our evangelical brothers and sisters have taken it, that you are saved by what you believe, by what you think. I doubt that God cares what we think, but God desperately cares about the quality of our character, about the love that we give and receive. By faith, Luther meant relationship with God and all that that is and implies. We are saved by our relationship with God in Christ, not in anything that we do.

What he was really getting at was two-fold. One, doing good works, tending the sick, blessing the dying, soothing the suffering, and the like, as important as that might be, and good, is not going to get you into heaven; by faith alone, right. This means we can’t earn our way into heaven, salvation comes by grace.

More importantly, though, and what was at the front of Luther’s mind when he ignited the Reformation, was that you couldn’t *sacrament* yourself into heaven. No religious works, be it honest prayer, genuine service, rigorous ascetic practices (fasting, hair shirts, scourges, whatever you fancy), or buying forgiveness such as the plenary indulgences or requiem masses that the wealthy purchased to get into heaven, none of those kind of works count towards salvation. Faith saves, and even there, true faith comes by grace.

If you read James, which I encourage you to do not only because it is good for you, but it will get you liturgically ahead because we are in James through the month of September, you will see that what he is saying is not in conflict with Luther’s theology. Like the first line in today’s lection, “Every generous act of giving,

with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." Our ability to do good, James writes, is itself an act of God. We are channels of the goodness and compassion of God in God's self! Vessels. Clay jars, even, carrying the love of God into the world by the authority given to us by that self-same God. Our divine nature, our Christ nature, given in our creation, ordained in Baptism, comes to fruition in action, making us "a kind of first fruits of his creatures." Metaphysically this dove tails beautifully with Jesus' teaching of what you do to the least of these you do to me. The economy of good works is a Mobius strip of continuity. Isaiah says it perfectly:

For as rain and snow fall from the heavens \*  
and return not again, but water the earth,  
Bringing forth life and giving growth, \*  
seed for sowing and bread for eating,  
So is my word that goes forth from my mouth; \*  
it will not return to me empty;  
But it will accomplish that which I have purposed, \*  
and prosper in that for which I sent it.

Love in action comes from God and returns to God, seamlessly, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever, AMEN.

Now I hope no one needs to hear a sermon to realize that doing generous, loving things for people who need generosity and love is a 1. good thing to do, and is 2. a primary function of Christian faith and Christian community. It is both. It might not earn us a spot in heaven (whatever that could possibly mean), and it won't make up for our manifold sins and wickedness, as we sometimes say in Rite I, but selfless, sacrificial giving, as demonstrated by Jesus Christ, is a purer exchange than the quid pro quo of doing good because it hooks you up with God.

So that is enabling learning objective 1: do good in the world. Not for selfish reasons, but because that is just what followers of Christ do. We do it because we are commended to do (love God and neighbor), and because it is in the nature of a Christian to do acts of loving kindness. We good with that assessment?

OK. Now the question is, how?

It took me a solid five years of full-time ministry followed by a very thoughtful sabbatical to come to some conclusions about this question: how do we do good works as a Christian people? We have, in most aspects of our lives, at least dual natures. At all times we are separate, individual creatures. There is a distinction between me and you. (There might not be one between I and Thou, but the me-you line is pretty discernable across what some philosophers call the intersubjective space between beings). You cannot see the world through my eyes, you cannot feel my pain, as much as I share it, you cannot experience my joy. You can deeply listen, you can accompany, you can empathize, but my feelings are mine and you can't feel them as I do. AND, as separate as we are, we cannot survive alone. We are blessedly (and sometimes cursedly)

interdependent. Just think about our COVID response: what you do matters to, impacts everyone else. We live like that if we wish to thrive as a community. We are connected, indelibly. I love the prayer in Compline that goes, “...grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other’s toil...” Goodness does it.

So what is our base unit of action as a Christian people? Where do our good works come from. Is it the church? Should us, working together, be the central outlet of our good works? Is that what the church needs to do, organize communal, collective works for the sake of the world? Or, is the church’s primary responsibility to form us, encourage us, exhort us to be the generous and compassionate Christian actors in the world that the grace of God enables/demands us to be?

Obviously the answer is both. There are some things, like the St. Francis fair, that can only be done as a community. I’ve been to some good yard sales, but it takes a community to put something on like what you all did for 30 years. Or out in Eugene, we built a tiny house village in the parking lot. Sure, people could have built tiny houses, or given a room in their home to house the unhoused, but that is higher math/higher risk ministry, and fostering a cluster of folks in an intentional community is something that most individuals couldn’t do on their own. A church, however, with budgets, volunteers, physical infrastructure, the ability to make policy and enter into agreements with other organizations, the inherent resilience of an institution, insurance, all of those factors made communal good works preferable (if not possible) in this case. We need to organize, concentrate resources, and apply them to solving the problems of our community as a body, as The Body of Christ. We do that because some things can only be done to scale, or can only be done with the resources a community can bring to bear.

But sometimes, the best way to do that work we have been given to do is to do it on our own, in our own lives, with formation and encouragement from church. Maybe church is good works boot camp (or finishing school). Church is where we learn to be who Christ wants us to be, we are supported in doing what Christ wants us to do. How many of us give more to other causes than you do the church? (That is primarily a rhetorical question) because I know that most of you do. Even though we are in our annual campaign right now, we are not in competition for what you give to other worthy endeavors. Few of us tithe to church, and I barely promote that as a goal, not that it isn’t a worthy one. I would, however, encourage everyone here to tithe for the common good. Give 10% for the sake of the world (more if you are wealthy because giving 10% will likely not affect your life. Remember, the spiritual benefits of giving don’t take effect until you can feel it, ‘til you have to make adjustments to your life to accommodate your generosity).

Good works are absolutely not limited to giving, it is just an easy one to illustrate. Really, most people spend what, an hour and a half at church each week? Some (non-Episcopal) churches end Sunday mornings saying, “Our worship is over, our service begins.”

Anyone know the greatest single source of ground water pollution? Who says agricultural run off? Industrial emissions? It is our back yards. All the Roundup and grub killer and weed and feed we spread one pound at a time adds up to a deadly cocktail seeping into our water. Our little bits, our little pint at a time additions to the biosphere add up. Don't doubt that your contribution doesn't contribute.

Our little offerings also help. I don't make it a habit of quoting members of the Bush family, especially in the week where our Middle Eastern excursion is coming to a tragic and foreseeable conclusion, but George H.W. Bush's 1000 points of light is right on here. Maybe our best work is not in major institutions like governments (or minor ones like a parish church), but as atomized, individual actors each doing their small and critical part.

All of this is to say is that we, as the local outpost of the Kingdom of God, our good work in this world is two-fold. Together, we are called to concentrate the resources we are given to collectively address the problems of the world. Some projects need a team sized effort. And it is pedagogical. We learning how to serve as a community is a great entry to serving as an individual. We learn (or should learn) how to be more Christ-like in Christian community, and the hands on learning of doing the word is something we can do well here.

Because we, St. Francis, is one of the 1000 points of light serving God and neighbor across the world. We were about to launch our Adult Forum after church by inviting a string of community leaders to talk to us about what the greatest needs (and resources) they see in relation to their concern. We were going to invite the sheriff, and the Head of School at GSA and folks from Healthy Peninsula and maybe the Fisherman's Wives Association. And with the news they brought us, we'd conscientiously discern what we, collective, might have and want to offer our community. That's on hold for now. This isn't the moment for the kind of collective action a community like ours can offer.

It is, however, a time of desperate need in the world. And you are the 1000 points of light of St. Francis in this community (and the communities you head back to any time now). You are the members of the Body of Christ that this Body of Christ sends into the world to live and love and serve the Lord and our neighbor. You can use your checkbook (do save one for St. Francis, please), you can use your time, you can use your love to comfort and encourage those you love and those you maybe don't love yet, at least not as much as Jesus asks us to. Whatever you can do, do. And what we will do here is to encourage you, empower you, equip you with the courage and motivation to do what you in your heart of hearts know is the right thing to do when you encounter human need.

We can't do this alone. We don't do this alone. Thanks for being part of this body. AMEN