

“Practicing Pentecost: After Hearing the Word”

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

I can't remember the title of the novel, but I remember the piercing words spoken, I think, by a mother to her daughter, or maybe it was the other way around. “Of late, you've missed every opportunity not to speak.” Is it possible that we simply talk too much? I'll leave it as a rhetorical question, so that I don't have to use words to answer it. The paradox is obvious and unescapable; it feels like a bind. A positive double-bind? Our first reading suggests that we can hear words, which assumes we can speak them too, but unless we act on them we end up conflicted. And the gospel reading suggests that we can reside happily in a tradition that gives life structure and purpose, and thus “meaning,” but still live estranged from the very Reality for which the tradition exists.

There's far more here than we have time for today, because we will soon make our way to the Lord's Table and a bit later to the picnic table. Given the readings, however, I should ask, “Have we wasted our hands?” Observing a boy entering her classroom with dirty hands, the teacher stopped him and said, “Johnny, please wash your hands. My goodness, what would you say if I came into the room with hands like that?” With a smile the boy replies, “I think I'd be too polite to mention it.” Ok, we can politely say that on the surface, washing our hands is a matter of personal hygiene. But the minute we touch anyone or anything that will be touched by somebody else, well, what is personal suddenly escapes the proverbial bag. Right? And the same is true with speaking and hearing. We say that what we read and say is simply our business; it is our right! And what we hear God say through the words of James, Mark and the multiple writers, scribes and copiers of the scriptures is our business and our right! Woe to the Pastor who gets between a person and his or her Bible. Okay, let's try keeping this polite, the boy suggests.

But James, who remained in Jerusalem, the center of religion for both James and Jesus, and so represents the traditions of the earliest Jewish-turned-Christian way of life, instructs us to give credence to hearing and speaking words, but to give priority to acting on them. “Be quick to listen,” in other words “pay attention.” And be “slow to speak,” which suggests that even good listening can lead to hasty conclusions and rash re-actions, and haste usually makes “waste” and rashes make us crazy. And then James doubles down. He says, that if we look into the perfect law – the law of Christ, the law of Love that sets us free, like looking “into” a mirror, and keep looking, not just as hearers who forget but as doers who act, we will be blessed in our doing. And polite or not, James goes for the deepest nerve. If we think we are doing what we think God wants, but talk too much about it, we deceive not others but ourselves and become the worst of fools! But James gets more impolite than that. If we fail to stay looking into the perfect law that sets us free the very religious apparatus we are using to figure out what God wants us to do – be it a holy ritual or a holy book – can become useless. Use this as a test, as a measuring device, James says, for everything you think God is telling us to do: Are we caring for orphans and widows? And are we resisting the fads and silliness of the world, the narcissism and self-centeredness of those who care mostly for themselves?

To practice Pentecost, to live in the flow of holy Spirit presence and power, after hearing the Word, capital “W,” the Word made flesh, is the best way to escape self-deception. After hearing comes doing. I know it is madding. Hearing and talking is where the fun is, the fellowship, where birds of a feather flock together, after which coffee, tea and cookies naturally flow in church parlors. But flocks can flop, and church parlors can become echo chambers, and in time the orphans, widows and others on the margins who find it hard to get into a flock or church parlor are left unattended and in time unwanted.

Jesus, who on occasion was rather direct, put it this way: “Sure, wash your hands, nothing wrong with that. But don’t be hypocrites.” That just doesn’t wash. Amen.