

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*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.*

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Tricia and I got back yesterday from a brief impromptu visit to see my grandparents in Huntington. We spent Thursday and Friday night with them just hanging out and enjoying their company. They are in the process of selling their house and moving to their new home in Chattanooga.

Their realtor is a woman by the name of Necia Freeman. Necia has been working with them the past year to help them get the house ready for sale. There's a lot to be done. She's advising them on how best to present the house in order to make it attractive to potential buyers. But I don't mention Necia in this sermon because of her realty acumen. What is even more remarkable is what my grandparents' realtor does in her free time.

Necia is a devout Christian and an active member of a baptist church in Huntington. One day, she saw a small story in the local newspaper about a prostitute who was found dead in a cornfield in nearby Ohio. She was disgusted by how the story reported it so casually, as if it wasn't someone's daughter, someone's mother, someone's friend. Instead, it seemed like this woman was just another statistic of the deadly combination of prostitution and drugs.

So, informed by her Christian mandate to not just be a hearer of the Word but a doer of the Word, she decided to get to work. Once a week, Necia gets in her SUV and drives the streets of downtown Huntington and looks for prostitutes. She knows the locations where they tend to sell their bodies, often to fund their heroin addiction. In the back seat of her car are dozens of brown paper bags, each containing a combination of a meal,

a phone number for them to call if they decide to go to rehab or get off the streets, some Bible tracts, and - when it's cold - gloves and other clothes to stay warm.

She does this out of a sense of compassion and a respect for the complexities of the problem of both heroin addiction and prostitution, two social ills that are intricately woven together. As I'm sure many of you know, this part of the country has been ravaged by the opioid epidemic. And, for various reasons, just up I-64 from us is the "Ground Zero" of this crisis: Huntington, WV. Huntington has 10 times the national average of deaths resulting from heroin. My aunt Jan, who happens to be the fire chief of Huntington, says that the daily average of overdoses for the town of 50,000 is between five and seven. Some days it's been as high as 26. Some survive. Many don't. Thanks to my aunt's efforts to drastically expand the availability of Narcan, the emergency drug that can reverse the effects of heroin overdose, many people have been revived multiple times and given, therefore, multiple opportunities to seek help and turn their life around.

And much of the prostitution in Huntington, and elsewhere, is fueled by heroin addiction. Women get addicted to drugs for a variety of reasons, a combination of unemployment, mental health issues, domestic violence, and family patterns of drug abuse. Necia understood that in order to help the women who have resorted to prostitution, she needed to get to know them and gain their trust.

So she started driving around in her SUV and handing out the brown paper bags, getting to know the women, and - eventually - convincing them that she wasn't an undercover cop. She has helped hundreds of women in Huntington, often physically driving them multiple times to rehab facilities and shelters. She has walked through drug court with them. She has visited them in jail. She has supported them when they got out of jail and tried to stay sober and find a steady job. She has been so successful in helping many women escape the cycles of prostitution and opioid abuse that many of them lovingly refer to her as Captain Save-A-Hoe.

Friends, there is no better story than this one to highlight the ethos of the Book of James. James tells us that praying about the problem isn't enough. James tells us that if the faith we find in the sanctuary doesn't change our lives or other lives outside of it, then what we found wasn't really faith at all. It reminds me of a quote by Pope Francis when he said the following: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works."

Faith, for James, is not so much about belief as it is about action. For James, a faithful heart that does not feed the empty stomach is a deadly thing. A congregation that believes in the Gospel but does nothing to help the physical needs of the orphan and the widow is nothing more than a building full of hypocritical pharisees.

You see, we come to worship to be reminded of who we really are. We come to worship to be reminded that we are beloved children of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. We come to worship to be reminded that we have been baptized into the family of God in order that we might be a living and active part of the Body of Christ. We come each and every week to look in the mirror, so to speak, and be reminded of how we are beautiful, broken, and beloved. We look in the mirror and we see ourselves as disciples of the Living Christ, made to be his ambassadors in a world that needs transformation and begs for justice and righteousness. But what good is it, my friends, if we forget what that looks like as soon as we walk out those doors? What good is it when we send our thoughts and prayers and then do nothing but give ourselves a self-righteous pat on the back? The author of the Book of James gives the strongest rebuke of such behavior, even going so far as to call it deadly.

The Book of James compels us to ask pertinent questions such as these:

How much time and money do we spend on maintaining this building? Now, compare that to the time and money we spend on mission work? How do the two compare and what does that reflect about our priorities?

What needs are in the community outside of our doors that are not being met?

What God-given talents and gifts are present in this congregation that aren't being put to use?

How can we continue to grow as a congregation to make hospitality our deepest passion?

So, friends, as we begin our walk through the book of James, let us remember that the Christian life is grounded in service. And that service does not have to be rocket science. In the case of Necia Freeman, all it took was some brown paper bags, some food, some scripture, a phone number, and - perhaps most importantly of all - a willingness to step outside a comfort zone and to leave the walls of the church.

Friends, we are to be not just hearers but also *doers* of the Word. Our job is to come to this table, to be fed by Jesus Christ, and to go out in the world to be his Body.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.