

14 Pentecost-B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The text comes from James: "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 God's own purpose, God gave us birth by the world of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures."

Let me tell you a little about my sermon study group. We're small; there's maybe seven of us if we're all there. We're American Baptist, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Lutheran. We're all white. We're all in our fifties, I'd guess. Except for Jared, who's forty. Sara is in her thirties. Early to mid-thirties.

Sara is one of the smarter people I know. And by that I mean book-smart. *And* life-smart. That's high praise. I don't know her that well, but I think she deserves it.

Well, on Monday morning we got talking about church. Three of us pastors, Sara among us, serve urban parishes in decline. All three congregations are living largely off their endowments. The likelihood of growth from the neighboring communities seems slim-to-none. All three churches have a collective memory from the time when pews were full, the Sunday School thriving, the youth group active, the couples clubs full of couples.

Then Jared spoke up. Jared is the Associate Executive Minister for the American Baptist Church in New York State, so he gets a good overview of what's happening in churches. He used to serve as a parish pastor, but now he travels from parish to parish of a Sunday as part of his administrative function.

Jared said, speaking of a church sociologist whose name I didn't know, "He thought the life span of a church should be seven years."

Did I hear that right? *Seven* years? Not seventy, not seven hundred. But *seven* years? What about posterity?

Then Sara spoke up, "You know, for Millennials, for GenX-ers," by which she meant people roughly her age, Jared's age and younger, "For us, we don't spend a lot of time thinking about the good old days of church when it was full. We never, ever knew those days. Churches are not full now. They're almost empty. And they're not going to get anymore full. Not much, even if we're lucky. So we just want to do what good we can with what people we've got. And I'm grateful for that. Because after all, most people don't want to join churches."

Well, tell me something I don't know, I thought--"Most people don't want to join churches." But then I thought again and realized, I *didn't* know that. Not really.

I mean, I think I know it in my gut. But my head is caught up with the perpetual struggle and mantra that drives every church I've served and almost every church my colleagues have served: *we need more people*.

That's the mission, push, drive, worry, concern, obsession, compulsion of most churches: *we need more people*.

And what does that mean? It means this: *We need more money. We need more people to staff committees. We need more Sunday School teachers*. Oh, and did I mention? *We need more money*.

But what if there was something to what Jared said? What if it's true that a church's life cycle should be seven years? What if there was something to what Sara said, that most people

don't want to join churches so she is grateful to be able to do what good she and her people can with whomever they've got, knowing they are limited? Limited and finite.

Now, I would be lying to you if I didn't say that ministry is hard work and hard in large part because so many of our congregations are in serious decline and are in denial about how serious that decline is. Not a single parish but one in Rensselaer County can afford a full-time pastor. Yet none of them want to close. It's depressing for a clergy person to run a Bible study that three people show up for. It's painful to know that the same half-dozen or dozen people do the same work year after year and dare not fatigue because then how would the work get done? You see that pattern in church after church.

Makes you think about Jesus words in Matthew, doesn't it? "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Makes you want to say, "Not in church is it light, Jesus. Not in church."

Or--maybe we're struggling under the wrong yoke. Maybe we are bearing the wrong burden. Maybe we are not paying enough attention to where the yoke of Jesus would lead us because maybe we are set in our ways. Maybe we are stubborn about insisting that we must get more people into our churches, that we keep all our programs running, same as before, that we make our churches look as much as we can the way they looked thirty years ago.

But maybe that's not where the yoke of Jesus is leading us now.

I have to say that I don't think it is.

As you may know, Luther didn't like the book of James. He called it "a gospel of straw." And he called it that because in places it simply refutes the Pauline theology of justification by grace through faith rather than works that we find in Romans and Galatians and Ephesians and other places. James refutes Paul's theology. And he goes so far as to say "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."

That line of thinking was anathema to Luther. To him it was the embodiment of works righteousness, the idea that we could somehow make ourselves right with God. And truly, few Lutheran pastors of my acquaintance enjoy preaching on James, though I like James and think he's got a lot of good things to say. Because I don't think it's all law and judgment. I do think it's wholesale advocacy for works righteousness. Instead, I think the writer of James is calling us to look seriously for the light and easy burden and yoke of Jesus and to pay attention to what we are being called to do, which may not be to try to preserve a status quo.

So I don't hear judgment in these words; I hear an call to opportunity, to exploration. Listen again to this snippet from our second reading: *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.*

Which prompts me to ask: What is the church doing? What is our church, St. John's, doing?

We really dare not exist simply for ourselves, trying to get more people in the door so we can prop ourselves up and prop our doors open. So how can we best give of ourselves to a world that doesn't need church very much, a world that, by and large, ignores church?

I think that's the challenge we face as a congregation. Do we live most faithfully by consolidating with First and renewing ourselves as one somewhat larger congregation? Do we declare our lifecycle complete and give away our assets to those organizations that need them, individually finding other places to worship? Do we downsize in some way, moving to a part-time ministry in a smaller location?

How can we best look into the law of liberty that James speaks about and persevere, trusting that God is ever with us, even as everything else falls away from us?

Well, of course, we don't want things to fall away from us. We want things to be as we want them. I remember talking to a woman in another parish who said, "I don't care what happens to the church as long as I'm buried from the sanctuary."

I get that. I resonate with that. I know about the sweet attachment to favorite places. I have that attachment here at St. John's, as well. My oldest daughter was baptized here. My youngest daughter took her first steps in the Fellowship Hall. Many, maybe most of you, have even more memories and attachments than that. And I totally understand the desire to be buried from the place where you were married, where your kids were baptized, confirmed and maybe married here.

But struggling to maintain the status quo for sentimental reasons is not the same as seeking out the light and easy yoke and burden of our Lord.

The Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, writing in the aftermath of the First World War—the Great War, as it would have been to him and all those of that generation, created a poem called, "The Second Coming." In it he says,

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;"

It's a powerful poem, Yeats' "The Second Coming." And I think, in this world of fragmentation, violence, religious and political turmoil, we all often feel that "things fall apart; the center cannot hold." And yet sometimes I also feel bold enough to say that "some revelation is at hand." Because I do believe in the work of the Holy Spirit. I do believe, just like the United Church of Christ motto says, that "God is still speaking." I do believe that church as we know it is changing, possibly or even probably, dying. And we need to face that, we need to attend to that in order that we can make room for the revelation that is at hand, the revelation revealed again and again that God is our Emmanuel, God with us, always. We need to be creative and curious as God calls us into crafting a new witness to the body of Christ alive now.

Hear how James is calling us into that newness, into the revelatory and unchanging light that is God's creation:

"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, God gave us birth by the world of truth, so that *we* would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."

Love God. And be at peace.

Amen.