

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
September 6, 2009
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 18)**

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Psalm 125

James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

I had looked at the Scriptures last week and decided to split the message from James into two weeks. The Scripture 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.” Last week you got the sermon about feeding the widows and orphans. It was a sermon about good works. This week it is about the second part of that verse – keeping oneself unstained by the world.

This week we hear the consequences of worldliness, and so it is a natural division to make I claim. The reading from James today talks about how we treat people differently because of appearance or our assessment of how important or rich they are. This sort of thing happens all the time, and the challenge to us is to rise above it as Christians.

In the mid 80's I was on a motorcycle trip with a friend, and we were caught in a serious rainstorm. Everything we had got completely soaked, and so we were going to hang clothes out to dry at the campground. We had stopped for gas somewhere and decided to stop at the Salvation Army to buy some new clothes so we would have at least something dry to wear. I found some things that fit and for a couple of dollars, I was a lot more comfortable. In one of those things that I thought was pretty funny at the time, the shirt was a work shirt with a patch that said “Chuck's Automotive.” The name over the pocket read “Steve.”

Now I will tell you something you probably already know or suspect. People who present as car mechanics are not treated like idiots in auto parts places. I have gone to a parts place and asked for something only to have the guy behind the counter argue with me. Try buying car parts wearing a suit sometime. Buy car parts wearing a shirt that says “Chuck's Automotive,” and you get exactly what you ask for, and you get a discount without even asking. It is like magic.

A famous educational study was done that looked at the factors in student success. They looked at all sorts of things, but it turns out that the single greatest factor is teacher expectation. We expect students to do poorly, and so they do. We expect them to do well, and they excel. This study is old enough that I was reading about it when I was in teacher prep classes. I tried to quickly look it up on Google for the sermon, and I discovered that there are a bunch of studies like this, and they all say the same thing.

Now suppose we do the same thing as Christians? We expect people to live as Jesus did. We look for them to live lives of grace, and they do. Does it work this way? I strongly suspect that human nature is human nature and we find what we are looking for. Look for success and you find it. Look for grace and you find that as well. Look for failure and betrayal, and you start seeing failure and betrayal everywhere.

Now, what does this have to do with the worldliness in the Scripture? We read in James:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

It turns out that James is addressing this very issue. We have "made distinctions among ourselves." This practice does not further the kingdom. It divides and does not unite. It marginalizes people and does not bring them to Jesus. So why do we do it?

We do it because of worldliness. We do it because we see things as the world does. We do it because we treat people as things, and we do it because we do not see people as Jesus does.

A good question at this point maybe is what does it mean to be worldly? I am going to claim that the world sees things in terms of cost and benefit. Today's epistle talks about a worldly approach to evangelism where we treat visitors in church differently based on what we think we stand to get from them. I think that when we are worldly, we are wearing our money goggles. We have a filter up and see things in terms of dollars and cents. You have seen the cartoons where something happens, and Donald Duck's eyes turn to dollar signs and you hear "ka-ching." This has happened in churches too, and it is not a new phenomenon. James was writing about it.

Now here I am preaching about how we find what we look for, and I am dwelling on the bad behavior I don't want to see. So I am going to own up to my own bad example and talk about the Jesus goggles instead. How does Jesus see people?

Jesus sees each of us as precious, and he loves each of us. He is not in relationship for any advantage or because he has done a cost/benefit analysis. Jesus may see us as sheep without a shepherd sometimes, but he is the Good Shepherd, and so He is providing the answer to the problem He sees.

I am feeling pretty good here. There are teacher expectations that predict success, and Jesus has high expectations for me. According to all the studies, I am likely to be successful in my religious life. Are there implications for me? Are there consequences to my being a Christian?

You know the answer is "yes." We look at the epistle and James writes "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" We are called to act and not just sit around enjoying grace and occasionally grateful that we are saved.

We are called to “seek and serve Christ in all persons.” We are called to be the hands of Jesus for those who need help. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called not to show partiality in our dealings.

This is a tall order. It is a set of very high expectations. Here is the thing. Jesus has high expectations for you and so do I. If teacher expectations are the best predictor of success, you are destined for greatness.

At the cathedral, they had a sign back by the sacristy in Notre Dame colors that read “Pray like a champion today.” This is the basic message for you in this sermon. It is not a harangue about how worldly everyone is and how we are wretched sinners. It is the observation that we are champions and we need to act like it. We are so blessed by God’s grace, and we have so many opportunities to be witnesses to God’s love.

I want to go briefly to the Gospel to make an observation. I love this reading where Jesus heals the deaf man with the speech impediment. Jesus tells the man not to tell anyone, and the man runs out and immediately tells everyone. Here was a guy after all who had not been able to speak and be understood his whole life. I understand Jesus is getting some time out of the office and is a man here who needs a break from the relentless lines of people looking to be healed, but he knew that the first thing the guy would do is go show off his new ability to speak.

I am reminded of the hymn “How Can I Keep from Singing?”

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
A fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am his--
How can I keep from singing?

My challenge to you is to be like this man who has been healed.

We need to be living, walking, speaking examples of God’s power.

We are called to see the world through God’s eyes and expect the very best from our neighbors.

The message is that we can do it with God’s help. It is the message in the letter of James. It is one of the fundamental messages in the Gospel. It is my sermon in a nutshell.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen