



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – August 30, 2009

A Foundation of Straw
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James 1:17-27

¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

¹⁹My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

²¹Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

¹⁷"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

¹⁸I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the

smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

¹⁹Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

The famous Irish writer James Joyce once stated "It is quite impossible to walk through Dublin without passing a pub." In the same vein, it is quite impossible to walk the highways and byways of Protestant theology and church history without constantly running into Martin Luther. Try to spend a lazy weekday afternoon searching around town for the gateway to Heaven and you'll find Martin Luther, rallying against indulgences. You're off to an early Sunday matinee downtown, and there's Martin Luther on your left, pounding a hammer, nailing his 95 theses into the door of the Castle Church at Wittenburg. If you pull the layers off of almost any theological inquiry, you're likely to find the face of Martin Luther there, like the not-so-sneaky villain at the end of an episode of Scooby-Doo.

Besides being such a key figure in Christian theology and the face of the Reformation, Luther was also quite the Biblical scholar in his day. He taught lectures on Psalms and a number of the epistles, strengthening and defending his theology based in sola fide, or justification by faith. The emphasis on acts (on the importance of action) in the book of James, where our passage came from this morning, gave Luther a bit of a headache. It seemed contrary to the core of his beliefs, dangerously close to the old teachings of the church that he had struggled so hard against. It was for this reason that he dismissed the book of James as an "epistle of straw".

Now, I am three months out of Divinity School, on the verge of ordination, I haven't even framed my diploma yet though the box has been sitting next to my desk for weeks. I'm not about to challenge Martin Luther here

this morning. Perhaps the book of James is an “epistle of straw”. But perhaps we can reframe what this has the possibility of meaning.

There is, of course, a modern colloquialism - “That was the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Straw, in this case, is symbolic of the final injury, the insult that ultimately allowed the whole thing- a relationship, a job, a public policy, to fall apart, to break down. Straw can be deceptively destructive. But straw can be constructive as well. Throughout the ancient world, workers, builders, architects took straw and mud or clay and using either the heat of the sun or the heat of a fire, formed bricks. This took place in Mali and parts of Greece and even the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus. Straw, this supposed flimsy material that could be blown away by even a mild wind held together buildings, houses, stores, fortresses. Straw in its natural state could easily be dispersed or dispatched of, but it also became the foundation of some of the greatest cities in the days of the Empire and before. An “epistle of straw,” as Martin Luther would have it, can be surprisingly strong, solid, central to the Christian story.

But what is it that the Book of James says to us this morning? This passage, often attributed to the brother of Jesus, is the very beginning of the epistle. It is, in fact, its thesis statement. It lays out what the rest of the book will later elaborate upon. Its first emphasis is on giving. It claims, in fact that every act of generosity has its origin in God. It also offers a warning to be mindful of our interactions- quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. It compels us to be charitable, to care first for orphans and widows in distress. All these are centered on James’ key imperative. “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” “Doers of the word.” The Book of James is affirming, quite clearly, that our social interactions outside the church are of the same importance as our participation in worship, that charity, outreach, justice work, are in their own way as glorifying of God as prayer reading, hymn singing, and the preaching of the Word, that the acts of straw, mixed up with the muddled experiences of our daily lives in this world, can form the foundation of our faith.

In the twentieth century, James’ imperative reached new heights among American Christians. Rallying against the individualism of the revival tents, theologian Walter Rauschenbusch called for the need for “social salvation,” the deliberate decision to not only worry about getting souls to heaven, but also of transforming life on earth into the harmony of heaven. Charles Sheldon proposed that Christians live their lives according to one simple question, “What Would Jesus Do?” Martin Luther King, Jr., taking a sharp divergence from his namesake, took this theology and quite literally changed the face of the nation, spearheading a movement in which the social and religious aims were completely inseparable... the reimagining of the American dream and the faithful life - “doers of the word, not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

This set a precedent. There are some people in the world that want to know our personal theologies and our spiritual practices, and as Christians we know that these are undoubtedly important. But there are far more people who want to understand how our faith can address the litany of concerns that are raised up in the morning prayer and the nightly news. What do we do about health care reform? Education reform? Our economic crisis? Our international relationships? Our personal relationships? Why are these things not only our national concerns, not only our personal concerns, but our Christian concerns as well?

Now, some of you already know about my love for literature. This love for a good narrative, a good story... actually makes its way to television as well. I love shows on HBO. I loved the story of two centurion friends and the rise and fall of Caesar in *Rome*. I loved the multilayered storytelling of police officers, drug dealers, politicians, and school teachers in *The Wire*. But perhaps my favorite of all the shows on HBO was the stories that took place on a frontier, gold mining town called *Deadwood*. Now, this isn’t an official promotion to go rent the series. It’s not for everyone. There’s a good amount of violence and enough cursing to put off even the most ardent of sailors. But there is a good story too, and one of the primary plots revolves around a woman named Jane. Jane has lost her best friend, feels alone in the world, antagonistic to most people she meets. She has taken to drinking, isn’t completely averse to violence, and admits quite frequently and quite tragically that she doesn’t feel

whole enough to be loved. Eventually, a sickness hits the camp and Deadwood's doctor is overwhelmed. As more and more miners get sick, he realizes that he needs help desperately. When Jane's time spent with a patient, her care and nurture, helps him heal... the doctor becomes fully aware of how good Jane is in a calamity. She stays and nurses many to health, grieves over those who she loses to the disease. She acts, not necessarily out of a Biblical imperative, but because she realizes that at some very basic level, she owes that much to her fellow human beings. She serves for self-fulfillment, certainly, but she serves so that others may witness to the need for service as well.

Like Jane, we too must act. Not only because of an innate duty toward one another, but also because in responding to the needs of our neighbors, in supporting or opposing public policies for the good of those who are vulnerable, in standing in solidarity with those who otherwise would stand alone, we are lifting up our faith by our good acts. We are building the Kingdom of God upon a foundation of straw.

It would be an interesting exercise, I think, to look through the gospels for the number of times that Jesus proclaims, "I am the Son of Man" and the crowds who are gathered reply with... "Okay!" Certainly there is a yearning on their part. They must have wanted to believe in the coming of the Messiah, but they needed proof, they needed acts. And so the lame are made to walk again, the blind are made to see, the lepers are healed, Lazarus is raised from the dead, water turned to wine, a measly amount of food turned into a feast to serve thousands. The stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, the importance of this necessity is passed on to the disciples. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

The illumination of the glory of God by the good works of Christians has been a lesson passed down again from the disciples to the church. We are two thousand years removed from the ministry of Christ

and with each passing year and each passing trial and tribulation, an assurance of faith becomes even more difficult. The church cannot simply spread the good news by virtue of its existence; it must proclaim it in worship and in action. When first visiting The Congregational Church of New Canaan, I did not hear about a Wednesday night miracle-working program, but I did hear about the Pastoral Care Team. I did hear about the commitment to Meals on Wheels and Pacific House in Stamford. I did hear about the dedicated commitment by the youth to a number of service projects throughout the country. This past week I even had the chance to spend an afternoon with a number of members of our congregation serving lunch at the Open Door Shelter in Norwalk. I celebrate with you the fact that you have done wonderful things and have helped to let the light shine. I am also challenged with you to continue seeking together for the darkened corners of our communities, where our charity, or service, or commitment to justice may reflect the faith that we share so earnestly each Sunday morning.

Inevitably, Martin Luther had a point. No amount of good acts will bring us closer to salvation any more than any amount of bad acts will keep us from it. The grace of God is both greater and larger than any such formula that we can try to create. What our actions may do, however, is bring us closer to one another, and become a foundation of straw just strong enough to hold the light of the Kingdom of God so that others may see it... just an inch above the bleakest horizon.
Amen.