

*Every time someone says, "**Listen for the Word of God**", I hear the voice and remember the faith witness of my mentor and pastor the Rev. Dr. M. Bruce McKay. When he uses these words to introduce a reading from the Holy Bible, I know that what is about to be offered aloud is important. I know this because I heard it in his voice and saw it on his face every single time he spoke it in the context of worship.*

Even though Bruce is living and serving faithfully in Buffalo, he might as well be in the same room because his presence is with me. Thanks, friend.

Shalom,

James

“All Good Gifts”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 2, 2012

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

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

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ ⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

James 1: 17-27

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹ 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.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 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.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 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.

Listen for the Word of God:

The Letter of James, written by “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,”

calls us to confess and address our choices in words

which may harm and hurt.

The author writes,

“For all of us make many mistakes.

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect.

No one can tame the tongue.

With it we bless the Lord...and with it we curse those

who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” (James 3: 2, 8-10)

Words matter.

We are challenged to listen for the Word of God, which is implanted in our souls,

and to speak the Word in such a way

that we represent the righteousness of God.

No small order, yet it is not beyond our reach or capacity.

The first steps are to be faithful,

and to heed that which is essential.

Saint Alphonsus was born in Marianella, Italy, in 1696.

He was brilliant.

He was 16-years-old when he graduated from law school,
only to discover that he was a total failure as a lawyer.

So he entered the priesthood and served a parish for 43
years.

However, being a parish priest broke him both emotionally
and physically.

St. Alphonus retired and wrote books until his death in 1787.

The moral, perhaps, is that

*“If you are a failure as an attorney, and a lousy
preacher,*

you can always write a book.” (W. Goodin,
“God Laughs, Too”, Pg. 70)

This Labor Day Weekend it does appear

that there are more words in our fair city than
anywhere else.

College football has begun with a flourish;

Atlanta is abuzz with visiting alums from major
universities

who have filled whatever space and airwaves
are available.

Dragon Con participants are parading around Atlanta in fantastic costumes,

speaking in Elvish and selling Star Trek tracts.

We are delighted to be hosting the Decatur Book Festival.

Our downtown common grounds are overflowing

with authors and artisans, self-publishers and professional printers,

plus an estimated 80,000 readers from around the world.

That, my friends, is a lot of words.

We are literally and figuratively surrounded by words.

Sometimes we hear so much

and say so much

that it's difficult for us to discern

which words mean the most,

and what is most important.

What phrase do you use to get someone's attention?

Do you say, "You must understand this", "Listen to me", or "This is important"?

When someone says to you, “This is important!”

are you apt to pay closer attention? Or do they have to say your full name?!

We find these same terms and phrases in the Holy Scriptures.

Both the Gospel of Mark and the wisdom writings of James get right to the heart of God’s intent.

You must understand this.

This is important.

This is essential, necessary, vital, indispensable.

This word you are about to hear means more and matters more than all others.

Listen for the Word of God:

Then [Jesus] called the crowd again and said to them,

“Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,

but the things that come out are what defile.”

Jesus Christ found himself in conflict with the established order,

with the keepers of the Law of Moses.

It isn't that Jesus sought to defy the Law;

rather he sought to fulfill it, to enhance it,

by showing that the Law of Moses

is to be practiced in a context of love and grace.

The main point of the Law of Moses

was not the Law in and of itself;

the crux of the Law was to build community,

one in which love and grace might flourish.

You see, Jesus' followers were eating and serving one another and the community

without following long-established traditions for cleanliness.

Now, please don't go home and say, "*Jesus says I don't have to wash my hands*

before I cook or eat or serve someone."

The Center for Disease Control and common sense would not approve.

Jesus boldly raised the question:

What are your rules and traditions aiming to produce?

What is really the most important thing?

That you become ever more loving, serving, and faithful,
and that you do good works for the glory of God.

Listen for the Word of God:

James said, *“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.”

James’s letter reads like wisdom literature,

replete with wise sayings and counsel for faithful living.

The author hones in on the crux of any relationship: communication.

Be quick to listen.

Be slow to speak.

Be slow to anger.

Which do you find best represents God’s

righteousness: quick anger or slow patience?

In effect, James' message says to us,

“Put everything else aside and focus on this one thing:

don't jump to conclusions, don't jump down someone's throat,

don't jump into a conversation without bothering

to listen and hear what is being said and why.

That is not the way of God.”

What has been your experience when folks are quick to answer,

refusing to listen,

choosing to spend the time that someone else is speaking

with planning a response?

What have you noticed about what happens when we jump to conclusions?

We may miss the nuances and subtleties of our neighbors' lives.

We may miss the best part of being in relationship with one

another.

We may miss hearing one another's story.

We may miss being God's righteousness in the world.

This is important: Be a listener, a hearer of the word,
yet also be a doer of the word!

Listen for the Word of God.

We live in a social network age where seldom is heard an encouraging word.

Think about it.

Television news programs, documentaries, and even sitcoms

appear to make their mark

by focusing on that which alarms, harms, and disarms.

Bullies use cruel language to haunt innocent victims in school buses,

at the office water cooler, and on Facebook.

Why go through the effort to build someone up with kind words

when you can more easily put them down?

And then there is the Church of Jesus Christ.

May the Church be a safe place for all of God's children.

May the words we speak and songs we sing build up and sustain one another.

May we give generously of our resources and best energies

to be and share and become a beacon of hope.

We -- the Church -- put a lot of words out for public consumption.

The church marquee words we posted on our front lawn that have gotten the greatest response ever said:

IF YOU HAVE BEEN HURT,
ABUSED, OR MISUSED
BY THE CHURCH,
WE ARE SORRY.

Confession is good for the soul,

especially if your main goal is to fulfill the Law of Moses by living with love and grace.

Listen for the Word of God:

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above...” –James 1: 17

Every generous act of giving is a gift from God.

Tune into the Word that is implanted in your soul.

What words have you heard that came across as gifts from God?

What words do you need to share that may be received as a divine blessing?

The Goodin family has four adopted children,

and, as they point out on occasion, none of them match.

Andy is three-quarter Cree, one quarter African-American.

Catherine is half Hispanic and half Caucasian.

Daniel is one-half Caucasian and one-half African-American.

Erica was born a Mexican national.

One day on the playground a child asked Andy,

“If you are brother and sister, why are you black and she is white?”

Andy, with all the wisdom of a four-year-old, answered,

“Because that is the way God made us.” (Goodin,
“God Laughs, Too”, Pg. 41)

God made you good.

God planted a good word in you.

God’s will, if I may be so bold,

is to sustain your faith journey and mine and all of
ours together,

and may we fulfill the Law of Moses with love
and grace.

Go forth, my friends, practicing your faith in ways great and
small,

knowing that the words you say carry great weight.

Listen for the Word of God,

and you will be filled with all the power

of the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!

Invitation to Holy Communion

Lord, how do we know what best to say in difficult situations?

How can we best speak words of unconditional love?

As Jesus prepared his disciples for the crucifixion and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, he said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16: 12-14) Jesus teaches that we need to trust and obey the Holy Spirit which acts on Christ's behalf.

Come to the Lord's Table. Bring your questions, your concerns, and your joys. Be united with the power of the Holy Spirit, a spirit which "will guide you into all the truth."

Benediction

Go forth with the grace of God. Speak kindly and positively, with power and passion, and in all circumstances give thanks. Amen!