

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd**

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Date: August 29, 2021. Year B 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: James 1:17-27

Title: Putting Faith into Action

Focus: James challenges us to demonstrate our faith in daily living by urging us to be doers rather than just hearers and caring for the most vulnerable among us.

For Facebook Post:

### **Epistle Reading: James 1:17-27**

<sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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.

<sup>19</sup>You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>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.

### **Grandma T and Wisdom Sayings**

I was away the last two Sundays. Thank you to Pr. John Handrich and Pr. Carl Wilfrid for preaching and leading worship.

When I was last with you three weeks ago, we got talking about wisdom sayings. I told you a bit about my Grandma T and the kinds of things I learned from her, some summarized by a wisdom saying like

- “A stitch in time save nine.”

I learned other things from her which were shown by example, like how to care for things and viewing them as gifts of which we are stewards. I learned habits like frugality and character traits like determination or resiliency.

### **Practical Wisdom in James**

I was reminded of the benefit of that kind of practical wisdom as I read the text from James this week—because James could fairly be categorized as “wisdom literature.” James is not a continuous narrative with a dominant story line—it’s more of a

practical book with a collection of sayings and teachings for a developing community of Christ-followers who wished to distinguish themselves from the world by how they lived together.

The guidance James provided its first hearers could make it just as appealing to us as readers because we have the same need for practical wisdom and integrating faith with daily action. Some of the themes in James address practical questions you may have about your own faith and how you seek to live that out in everyday ways, such as

- Where is trust in God made visible or real?
- How do we put faith in action?
- What is the relationship between believing and doing?
- What does it mean to live as a Christian?

## **Luther—not a Fan of James, but Emphasized Justification by Faith**

Martin Luther was not really a fan of the book of James. It wouldn't have been the practical wisdom in James that he had a problem with—it was the degree of emphasis the book places on works rather than reliance upon faith in God for salvation. Martin Luther championed that theological affirmation we associate with the Reformation of “justification by grace through faith alone.”<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther would not have wanted anything to de-emphasize that, which could be seen in James’ focus on *works*. James says, for instance, that “faith without works is dead” (2:26), which would have made Luther squirm for sure. Martin Luther would have said “Faith alone.”<sup>2</sup>

The counter to Luther’s discomfort from James that is that James doesn’t describe works as *leading to* or the cause of our salvation, but as an *expression* of our faith.

At the same time, I can see that Martin Luther would have appreciated that James does provide support for people trying to authentically live their faith. Putting faith into action is a major (maybe *the* major) theme in James.

## **Differing Theological Lenses to View Coronavirus**

In our public and cultural discourse, Christians differ in the lens through which they view responses to the COVID virus and the public health guidance which has been so much a part of our lives for about a year and a half now.

### **“Faith, not Fear”**

Here’s one perspective on being a person of faith and the public health choices around the Coronavirus. A pastor describes his observations of a family in his

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, p. B-4 in *A Formula of Agreement Between the ELCA and the PC(U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ: On entering into Full Communion on the Basis of A Common Calling*. Approved by the 209<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther also disappointingly noted that there are only 2 direct references to Jesus in James (1:1, 2:1).

community during August of last year. The timing or date of his observation is important because of the public health guidance at the time to wear masks.<sup>3</sup>

I was recently at a farmer's market, and a particular family stood out to me. In a sea of face masks, they were the only ones not wearing them. Then I glanced down at the woman's shirt, and emblazoned on the front were the words "Faith Over Fear."

Then I got it. They were apparently among those who feel that wearing a mask displaces trust in God.<sup>4</sup>

Maybe you have read about or observed the same . . . Maybe you have encountered a similar situation in terms of actions which show the assumption that there is, on the one hand, trust in God and, on the other, recognition of or appreciation for medical science on the other and that the two are at odds with each other—as though it is exclusively trust in God or trust in science apart from one another.

## **Lutheran Heritage and Contemporary Theology**

That perspective is not the perspective of the Lutheran heritage we have inherited nor of mainstream contemporary Lutheran theological reflection.

### **Luther and the Bubonic Plague**

In August of 1527, the bubonic plague hit Wittenberg, Germany hard. It caused high fevers and large, weeping boils. It was highly contagious and had an astronomic mortality rate. It was spread by infected fleas and rodents and could also be transmitted through the air, but neither the cause of the disease nor its mode of transmission were known in 1527.<sup>5</sup>

In a letter entitled, "**Whether one may flee from a deadly plague,**"<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther explained the importance of caring for our neighbor. He wrote about the community and taking the necessary steps to protect others. He encouraged the use of reason and medicine. He wrote,

"God has created medicines and has provided us with intelligence to guard and take care of the body. . . Use medicine; take potions which can help you;

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<sup>3</sup> CDC guidance as of August 31, 2020 from its "Epic Extra" newsletter: "CDC recommends that you wear masks in public settings around people who don't live in your household and when you can't stay 6 feet away from others. Masks help stop the spread of COVID-19 to others."

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/newsletters/epic/08312020.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Dr. James Emery White, Aug 17, 2020 at *Crosswalk.com* <https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/dr-james-emery-white/faith-over-fear-masks-covid.html>

<sup>5</sup> ERIN M. HAWLEY, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR to *The Hill*. "The plague, coronavirus and Martin Luther — why they all matter now." Posted 03/20/20.

<sup>6</sup> <https://reporter.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>

fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence."<sup>7</sup>

## **Wisdom from the Book of James**

In his concern for neighbor, Luther echoed the themes of the book of James. (That's ironic, isn't it, given that he wasn't in favor of the book.)

The first is to recognize that we are to put faith into action:

- "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves". (James 1:22).

James uses the metaphor of a mirror—that we would see ourselves or our actions clearly and that we would live in such a way that there is coherence between what we understand in our heads and what we say we believe with what we actually do.

Twice in this passage, James warns us about our capacity for self-deception (v. 22 and 26). Do you want to know if you're deceiving yourself about putting your faith into action?

At the end of today's passage, there is another summary sort of verse that gives us a tool for self-assessment.

- <sup>27</sup>Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress. . . (James 1:27).

The phrase "widows and orphans" refers most specifically, of course, to literal widows and orphans. But through its frequency of use in both the Old and New Testaments, particularly in directing listeners to provide special consideration for them, the phrase or term carries symbolic value as well. Since in the ancient world widows and orphans were the most vulnerable members of society with the fewest rights or legal protections, the term in practical use refers to whoever are the most vulnerable. And the phrase urges us to reflect on how we care for them:

- Who are the most vulnerable among us?
  - With the Coronavirus, it's the elderly with other health challenges, those who are immunocompromised, racial minorities who already face health care disparities, and children and others who cannot yet be vaccinated.
  - Who else are more/most vulnerable among us? James shows consistent care for the poor.
  - Would it be refugees and others who are displaced?
  - In our current time, would it be those who are survivors of earthquakes in Haiti, flooding, and other widespread disasters?

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<sup>7</sup> Originally from "Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," 1527. As excerpted in "ELCA presiding bishop addresses concerns about COVID-19" March 6, 2020. [https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8025?\\_ga=2.89415835.1266049829.1630209315-1986897067.1630209315](https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8025?_ga=2.89415835.1266049829.1630209315-1986897067.1630209315)

Later in James, in chapter 2, there's another summary sort of verse that provides over-arching ethical guidance. James writes,

- You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (James 2:8).

The way that James highlights 'loving one's neighbor as you love yourself' is striking in light of what we said earlier: Martin Luther noted negatively that Jesus is only explicitly mentioned twice in James—and yet Luther echoes what James says here and James' summary of the law incorporates how Jesus himself responded when asked about the most important commandment.<sup>8</sup> Jesus essentially said, "Love God and love your neighbor."

James may not mention Jesus more than twice, but he has highlighted Jesus' teaching on faithful living.

### **Guidance from Current Lutheran Social Statement**

So, what does contemporary Lutheran theological reflection have to say?

**Medicine and trust in God do not need to be at odds with one another.** "In Lutheran teaching, medicine is considered a gift of God for the good of the community."<sup>9</sup> It is not a false choice about either trusting God or living in fear. It is about recognizing medicine or science as a gift of which we are stewards, to be wisely used.

**Public health affects us all and should be valued by all.** Whereas some express resentment over public health directives and view it as an infringement of first amendment rights or an overstepping of boundaries by public leaders, both the Lutheran heritage and ELCA teaching encourage participation in public health efforts since health is a shared endeavor.<sup>10</sup>

Health implications go beyond the domain of defining and asserting "my" personal body and rights. The health of the whole community is connected to each person's health. My health is related to yours; your health is related to mine. Therefore, the ELCA as a church denomination supports "a comprehensive approach to health care as a shared endeavor among individuals, churches, government, and the wider society."<sup>11</sup>

To put it in terms from James and Jesus, public health is about caring for neighbor.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark 12:28-31, Matthew 22:35-40, and Luke 10:25-28.

<sup>9</sup> "ELCA Talking Points on ELCA Social Teaching regarding vaccination during a pandemic." Prepared by Dr. Roger A. Willer, Director for Theological Ethics, Office of the Presiding Bishop. No date is provided. I think it's August 2021 based on when it was circulated. [https://306e6573-8a76-4c5c-bab5-b7a5de631639.filesusr.com/ugd/d813a8\\_8fd5bdc879c24ae8b3aa4d7274855cdd.pdf](https://306e6573-8a76-4c5c-bab5-b7a5de631639.filesusr.com/ugd/d813a8_8fd5bdc879c24ae8b3aa4d7274855cdd.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> "ELCA Talking Points"

<sup>11</sup> Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor (CH:OSE)

[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/HealthSS.pdf?\\_ga=2.107516996.731835658.1626404296-1208436962.1626404296](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/HealthSS.pdf?_ga=2.107516996.731835658.1626404296-1208436962.1626404296)

## Closing: Public Health and Christian Response

It is unfortunate but true that in our current political climate, health care guidelines have become politicized.

Though surgeons and health care providers have been wearing masks for ages, during the pandemic, they (masks) have become symbols beyond their use as protective gear. They too have become politicized as reflective of a partisan choice.

Along with the re-interpretation of masks, sources of authority to whom we have turned in the past have been taken for granted, ignored, doubted, defied, treated with contempt, and, in the most extreme cases, been verbally and physically threatened.

While comments from one sermon won't change the tide of these broad political currents, Lutheran heritage and contemporary Lutheran theological thought as reflected in ELCA Social Statements follow the biblical themes we identified in today's reading from James and in the greatest commandment expressed by Jesus of

- Care for the most vulnerable, those whom James identifies as the "widow and orphan" and
- Loving your neighbor as you love yourself (James 2:8) and elsewhere in the gospels.

**May we, as James urges us, be doers of the word and not merely hearers.**