

**Sermon preached
by Doug King
August 31st, 2003
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
James 1:17-27**

It's coming, can you hear it? On this Labor Day weekend the sound may only be a distant whooshing that most of us are seeking to blot out by humming an aimless summery tune. But we know. Yes we know. The whoosh will soon be a rumble, the rumble of a freight train of activity that will sweep us up as the fall arrives in a sudden rush. The kids will be back in school, the vacation suitcases will be tossed back into the attic for another year, and we will be busy, busy, busy.

If the lectionary were a kind and considerate schedule of scripture readings we would have had some text encouraging us to step back and smell the roses today. We would have had a text that encouraged us to have a few more moments of quiet introspection before the storm to come. But the lectionary decided, against gentle kindness, to bonk us over the head with an exhortation to get ourselves in gear right now. Cancel the Labor Day barbecue there is work to be done right this very minute.

From the wisdom literature of James we are told to be doers. Listening to the Word of God is pointless if you are not ready to go out there into the world and get your hands dirty doing the work of the Lord. Whenever I read any section of the Book of James I always end up feeling guilty for being too lazy. I feel put upon to do more than I can handle. For many of us, life and its many series of commitments and responsibilities are viewed through the lens of compromise. We measure the minutes of the day and spread the wealth as best we can, here is some time for work, for our families, for our church, for our recreation. But this James character is not a compromise sort of guy. For James it is about choice, and not multiple choice either, straight up either/or choice. You are either getting on the train of faithful living or you are left behind at the station. You are either with God or you are with the world. James is not the kind of guy who would be entertaining to talk to at a cocktail party.

What James is doing is calling us to change our entire view of reality. Luke Johnson writes, "For those living under the influence of modernity, the intellectual atmosphere shaped by the Enlightenment, "the world" is what is most real and obvious. It is a closed system of cause and effect and of limited resources. Humans are defined by their place in this system, and the system is defined by the capacity of human reason to measure it. What seems least real or obvious is "God," a name that has increasingly been reduced to a concept, and one that people must struggle to take seriously."

"For James, the opposite is the case. "God" appears as the subject in these verses...not as a remote or remnant concept, but as the One who is most real and defines reality. God creates humans, listens to their prayers, rewards their fidelity. Above all, reality itself is defined by the God who gives to all generously and without reproach, and who is the source of every good and perfect gift. If reality is defined by the endless bestowal of gifts, then it is not a closed system but an open one, not a world of limited resources, but of infinitely renewable resources."

Where we see a reality as a closed system in which we need to ration ourselves out, ration out our allegiances, our energy, our love, James takes the roof right off of our sheltered view of our world and our lives. James is not wagging a finger at us and scolding us to place serving the Lord as the first priority in our lives. James is actually beckoning us into a larger reality, a more generous reality. We are being called into a reality of being a conduit of God's generous blessings upon the world.

From our perspective it may seem that James is being unreasonable and asking us to give more than we can give. But from James' perspective it is not we who are the givers at all, by engaging in God's work, the love of God flows through us to a world hungry for God's blessing. What sounded at first like a chore is beginning to sound like a privilege. Hear the words from verse seventeen again, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." The deepest reality in all of existence for James is God's never-ending generosity.

It is as if we are tired and hot and slumped along the side of a wide and powerful river. We look out into the middle of the rushing water and we see James calling us in. At first it appears James is calling us in to swim upstream to push our exhausted muscles even further beyond the point of exhaustion. But if we trust James, if we jump into the river, we will find the water cool and refreshing. And far from being called to struggle upstream we will find that we are given the joyful pleasure of letting the current float us downstream.

When we view the world in terms of a series of demands upon our limited resources every new request is an exhausting burden. But if we listen to James and recognize the generous nature of the God in our midst, when we take the risk to accept a new challenge to be generous to others we just find ourselves in the refreshing, energizing conduit of God's generosity.

So as we enter into the action packed craziness of the autumn season instead of merely working hard to protect your time and energy as limited commodities, let us give ourselves a gift. Let us accept a new challenge to care for others, to be used by God to bring love to the world, to float upon the refreshing waters of the divine. Amen.