Homily Proper 17B

S. Stephen’s, Providence

August 29, 2021

*“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only.”*

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the early church there was debate about whether or not

the Epistle of James should be included

among the books of the New Testament.

It didn’t seem to fit in the same stream of thought

as the letters of the apostle Paul.

1500 years later, and the German Protestant Reformer Martin Luther

famously calls the Epistle of James

an “epistle of straw,”

meaning that it is useless and contains no value.

But I love the Epistle of James.

It sits there like a thorn in the side of the New Testament

reminding folks that while the emphasis on faith –

in believing in Jesus and in ability to heal and to save –

is important –

it doesn’t negate the responsibility we have to our neighbor –

our Christian brothers and sisters,

and even those who we do not share a faith or ethnicity with.

In hindsight, the Epistle of James stands out like an early Anglican

“via media” or middle road in the course of Christian thought:

why choose one or the other when you can have both?

Faith is good, but doing good things for other people is also a good thing.

Faith may be the hallmark of Christian life,

but shouldn’t living a Christian life of service to others

also be a defining feature of a life informed by faith?

Lip service is easy.

Or, as my mother used to tell me, “Talk is cheap.”

The more common expression boils down to this:

actions speak louder than words.

This is true in every respect.

Of course, the problem occurs when we confuse human behavior

as an indicator of faith.

I may have a strong faith in our Lord Jesus Christ

and still be a terrible human being in a rare and fleeting moment.

I could also be a great doer of the word –

a shining example of righteous service and self-offering to my neighbor

and have little faith in God.

The truth and the heart of the matter are found,

as is so often the case,

in the heart of it all – in the intersection of the two.

Faith and works, hand in hand – or at least James seems to think so.

Show me your faith and I’ll show you my works –

or show me your works and thus your faith.

But if your actions don’t match your speech,

I’m not going to give you the benefit of the doubt, James might say.

James has a no nonsense matter-of-fact approach to things,

which is probably why I like this Epistle so much –

it’s a good fit for New Englanders and our cut-to-the-point

way of doing things.

Of course, it’s easy to get carried away and become focused on works,

or the amount of activity one does

in service to God or church or country,

and forget what it’s all about.

That’s why Martin Luther and others long before him

were made uneasy by this voice in the New Testament.

But there it sits, stirring us to this day

to examine our own faith, and to hold it up against the example

and witness of our lives:

making us ask ourselves, “Do my actions match my words?”

A good exercise for any serious Christian, I would add.

Right now, as we begin to try and emerge out of this pandemic,

even with its various setbacks and new challenges,

I think our Epistle reading has much to say to us this morning.

Yes, be a good Christian and be charitable toward your neighbor –

especially those in need or want.

That is obvious and hardly in need of explanation.

But what else is this parish being called to do?

What are the needs of this community that we can help to address?

How are we called to be an example of faith in action?