

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

[James 1:17-27](#)

The Minister at the Riverside Church in New York City has been run off.

It is a grand church, one of the great pulpits of American Christianity.

Henry Emerson Fosdick and William Sloane Coffin served there; it was built by John D. Rockefeller; stands nearby the Union Theological Seminary and the World Council of Churches.

It is at the center of mainline, liberal Protestantism.

Before he went to Riverside, the recently departed minister Brad Braxton was professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, which is really a liberal sort of place.

But he aroused great opposition at Riverside for something in his preaching.

An African-American, he apparently spoke too often, too warmly, too energetically, about Jesus. And he took the Bible too seriously, apparently some said.

People began to call him a fundamentalist, a nasty label on the upper west side of Manhattan to be sure.

That great church, that nurtured the Social Gospel movement in this country, now seems to be more social than Gospel.

His parting admonition was that "deeds and creeds" need to go together. He was suggesting that Riverside was far more comfortable with good deeds than with frank statements of Christian belief.

Doers of the Word, not hearers or speakers of it.

A deacon friend was telling me the other day about his training for the diaconate.

There was one deacon in his class who excelled at social ministry of the deacon.

She started after-school programs, soup kitchens, and free medical clinics.

My friend confessed, "She was a better deacon than me"

And yet the heart of the Gospel seemed to elude her.

When it came to speaking the word, rather than doing it, she could not preach Jesus Christ and him crucified.

There is a fair amount of Christianity like that in our denomination.

Lots of great doing without much theological foundation.

Maybe you have noticed a long-running divergence in American Christianity.

There are those churches that are very clear about doctrine, that stress personal salvation and personal morality.

They offer an inspiring and true understanding of who Jesus is, the Son of the Living God, the Savior of the world.

They can speak about Jesus, and how thankful I am for the clarity of their witness.

But they seem to have some blind spots when it comes to remembering Jesus' social teaching.

They speak about Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount recedes from view; Matthew 25 is unknown; the Letter of James from which we read today is forgotten.

Sometimes they seem not to care about the poor.

In our own region, the churches have generally been hesitant about social change that was clearly demanded by the Christian tradition, like ending slavery and then ending segregation.

Then there are other churches that are great at social action.

Social Gospel churches, we might call them.

They love the prophets of the Old Testament, railing against the rich.

They love Jesus' teaching and his own social ethic; time and again they turn to the 25th Chapter of Matthew to hear about the necessity of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, taking in the homeless.

But in many of those churches, Jesus is not understood as the Savior of the World.

His cross is an embarrassment best forgotten.

His claim to be God a distraction from his real importance as a teacher of virtuous living.

His resurrection is reduced to the warm memories of him that persisted in the minds of the disciples.

I am over simplifying, but we have churches that are richly theological on the one hand and churches that are blessed with a Christ-given social vision on the other hand.

It is a tragedy that we are divided thus.

The letter of James might give us a better prospect for hanging together.

Here is a verse for the theologically conservative, who tell us well about the Savior:

"In fulfillment of his own purpose, he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we could become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."

That verse is theological; it stresses the action of God.

God has given us a "Word of Truth."

What is the Word of Truth?

It is the Gospel, the good news about our being forgiven and raised to new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And what does it mean that we have become a kind of first fruits of his creatures?

It means we are called to personal and corporate holiness, to be individuals and a people who live new lives because of God's work in Jesus Christ.

So James explains that we can "look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere."

His image is visual, but he means this; we can be changed by hearing the good news of the gospel and be changed for holiness of life, doers of the Word.

This is what our church and denomination need for their renewal.

The believing comes before the doing; the Gospel about Jesus the Savior is our only foundation.

Our church really needs to get clear about the centrality of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord.

But if we believe in him, we can do no other than adopt his way, his vision.

And this is to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

It is to care for the poor, for widows and orphans in their distress, to feed the hungry, to work for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being, to be doers of the Word.

It is to live lives known by their love, peace, and justice.

I have said before that I hope our is always a both/and church, not an either/or.

If we are rooted in the Gospel, rather than in our politics, social status, or pocketbooks, we can be a church that does both theology and ethics well.

And that is a church through which God redeem the world.