**Homily for September 1st 2024 James 1:17-27 “That Old-Time Religion”**

*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. 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. 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. 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. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.*

It has been a while since we visited the writings of James, the foremost of the up-front, from-the hip, no holds barred biblical writers. He is kind of the New Testament version of the prophet Amos, who pulls no punches, but insists on religious practice that is *real,* not airy-fairy; no woo-woo for these guys! Yet, seeking reality, as you are well aware, is getting more and more challenging. Everybody is rightfully concerned about the misuse of artificial intelligence, but we seem to have let go of our common-sense insistence on *actual* intelligence! So today, we’re gonna do a little mental labor, and seek the foundations of what our grandparents would have called that old-time religion.

I don’t usually look for actual reality in reality television, but there is a breed of reality shows afoot that are pretty addictive – kind of self-help and home repair shows all rolled onto one. Bath Crashers, Yard Crashers, I Hate My Décor, those kind of titles, and they feature similar setups; some young and vibrant contractor/designer lurks about the home improvement center, trying to get people to take him home with them, and promises a full remodeling of their bathroom or bedroom or backyard, free of charge. These ‘crashes’ have a 48-hour window, but golly, they get a lot done in that time, with armies of volunteers and sometimes even the homeowners learning new skills. The results are pretty dramatic, often quite wonderful, and you can’t beat the price! And as much as I enjoy them as an amateur woodworker, as a pastor they alert my internal warning systems, because they reinforce some of our human behaviors that probably need to be reduced, not increased.

This is the Labor Day weekend, the end of summer, when we Americans celebrate labor by not doing any for several days. And this is the tendency, the habit, the pattern tapped into by these compelling shows…we all want the free thing, the new, shiny, cool thing, but we don’t necessarily want the labor involved in acquiring it. We want to be financially secure, and many work hard, but most of us kind of hope for the windfall, the big check out of nowhere. How else to explain the popularity of the lottery? How else to explain the full parking lots at the gambling casino’s at all hours of day and night? It seems to have become human nature to want the swag without the sweat.

Or have we always been this way? The writer of the epistle of James makes the same point as it applies to our spiritual lives when he warns, over and again, that it is not sufficient for us to hear the words, hear the teachings, but that we actually have to *do them.* We spend a lot of time discussing them, writing sermons about them, chasing the latest book that explains the latest biblical mystery, but not enough time actually engaged in spiritual practices. We all want a life of inner peace, the reward of a life well lived, but we want it on the cheap, or, better yet, we want somebody else to come in and give us a spiritual rebuild in 48 hours. I love Deepak Chopra, and Wayne Dyer, Maryanne Williamson, sometimes Tony Campolo, even, and for big money you can go to events with these teachers, and they will dramatically change your life…only, not really. It is still *you* who has to do the work, you who has to discern your call, you who must toss and turn in the night as your journey unfolds. Can they give us tools, tips, insights? Of course. But our faith is *our* faith, friends, and it is very easy to get seduced into the reality show model, and hope for somebody else to drop into our lives unannounced and change everything for the better, and fast, and maybe for free. Sounds good, but it just isn’t how things actually work!

The other point tossed about by James this morning is also reflected in the rebuilding shows I have lifted up here. They use a whole lot of sledgehammers, I guess because destruction makes for good television. But in the course of beating down the wall or making an opening for a new window, other problems are created, especially if there is unseen plumbing hiding in there, or, oops, I guess that wall *was* load bearing, after all! All their gusto and big noise does not ultimately help them; it feels good and powerful, and plays big on the screen, but time and money and energy is inevitably saved by slower, steadier, more thoughtful deconstruction. At the personal level, this is exactly what James is describing when he warns that human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. Anger is like a sledgehammer; it is a tool that must be used judiciously. And so we are not counseled to never be angry – that would be more unreal than even a reality show – but warned that, as good as it feels in the moment, anger does not help us reconstruct our lives. It does not bring us to balance and peace and wisdom, it just breaks stuff, trust and relationship mostly.

The old-time religion folks knew this very well. They did not have the Internet to hide behind in order to say scandalous and unproveable things about other people, often anonymously. Instead of digital sledgehammers, they had to do their dirty work in person, face to face, and the resulting reality is that they were a more temperate people, a more gracious people in many ways. How does James say it? *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.* Not flying off the handle, taking time to assess and evaluate, these were common religious values in the old days. And maybe they still are, maybe the primary modern offenders are non-religious folks, but I don’t think so; not with the sheer volume of rubbish that flows forth from much radio and television and podcast and blog, all labeled *Christian.* We are called to be people of personal piety and social justice. That is the job description assigned by John Wesley, and it is an old-time religious description, to be sure.

It seems a fine idea to be kind today for a change and let you out early, what with the holiday and all. And so I think I will stop, with just two points hopefully well made. And the points, in order of significance, are these: that in the perpetual rebuilding program we call Life, sledgehammers are rarely needed, and, most significantly, nobody is going to magically appear from around the corner with a cameraman and unlimited funds and fix our lives for us. The labor is ours to do, and while we share our skills and successes as best we can, the rebuilding of each life is personal and individual. It is, to be sure, a labor of Love, and cannot be accomplished without that, for Love is both raw material and fine tool, framing lumber and finished veneer. When we build with wood, we get wooden furniture. But when we build with Love, we get everything. Amen.