

SERMON for Sunday, September 3, 2006  
James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Rev. Shirley R. Funk  
Lake Edge Lutheran Church  
Madison, Wisconsin

### A Working Heart

*But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...* That's a lesson, from the letter of James, that the Christian church has taken to heart, at least in some ways. The Protestant churches in America that are growing the fastest have a direct face-to-face mission connection with those in other countries, where they can see the direct effects of their monetary donations at work. We as a congregation are doers, when on this Thursday we will serve a meal to the hungry gathered at Luke House on Ingersoll Street. Whenever we affirm our young children for an act of kindness we encourage them to practice what we teach. Our own sense of spiritual satisfaction increases whenever we are able to put a concrete action to what has previously been a vague and more abstract sense of faith. Declaring our faith in the serving and living Christ is to do something about it. On the other hand...

When Jesus engages with the Pharisees and the scribes, he gets involved, more than once, in declaring that simply following religious rules, doing the things that can be seen and observed, is not necessarily being faithful, using the words of the prophet Isaiah, *You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition...For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.* So to simply do something, without having the loving motivation from within, is not enough.

This is all pretty obvious, isn't it? So why bring it up, other than the fact that these are our lessons for today? Preacher and commentator Scott Hoezee from the *Calvin Center for Excellence in Preaching* describes the dilemma: *Don't we parents spend a good deal of our time making sure our children do not watch the wrong TV shows, do not listen to the wrong music, do not read the wrong books, do not look at the wrong websites? We CAN be corrupted and soiled by what comes to us from the outside, can't we? Well, yes. Yet we all know that there are people in this world – alas, there are people in the church, and sometimes we are in their number – who wouldn't go to an R-rated movie if you paid them, who have never seen so much as a glance of pornographic website, and who keep their radios tuned to only sacred music. And yet sometimes...not always, but sometimes, those same people can be among the most mean-spirited, judgmental, narrow-minded folks in all of society. Some may be prone to say absolutely hateful things about gay people or minorities. Some gossip in the church with a fervency that borders on the obsessive. Some would not greet a visitor in their church even if that person sat right in front of them. We do well to guard ourselves from external sights and sound and influences that could corrupt us or that may make a certain bad tendency we have already even worse. But you can keep that external surface squeaky clean and still do or say things that reveal your heart of hearts to be less than the loving font of joy and hospitality and grace that Jesus desires for each of his followers.*

We are a mix, each of us, sometimes filled with an invigorating faith that will send us out with energy and purposefulness to show God's love in everything we do, sometimes doing what we think we ought to do but with very little heart for the task, sometimes keeping our private thoughts private, because we think, what we believe is nobody's business but our own. What are we going to do about it? One danger comes when we, like the Pharisees suggested, and as Jesus pointed out, let the form of religious behavior, and even the Bible itself, cover up the ugliness of our not-too-

pretty hearts, and think that we are still doing ok in the sight of God. When we use the Bible as list of rules and a moral scorecard, by which we can check off what we do as right, then we have perverted the deep love God has planted in our hearts. Certain issues have become those identifiers in our society, the opinions we take on the major issues such as abortion, contraception and homosexuality determine to others our real Christianity. We let it happen. It is not what we intend, but what we do because it is often the easier way. Another danger is a slide into a contemporary trap called spirituality, as author Garret Keizer summarizes, *...the popular dinner-party disclaimer: 'I'm very spiritual but I'm not religious at all.'...Religion is too much work. Religion is potluck suppers, for Christ's sake – disciplines and dogmas and, most trying of all, pews full of other people. Spirituality is lighter on its feet. Is this what Jesus meant?*

I would like to share with you two stories this morning. The first I know that some of you will recognize from my having shared it before, but it is one of my favorites that bears repeating. It was first told by Robert McCracken, the preacher in the mid-1900's at Riverside Church in New York. *For thirty-eight years W.H. Lax was a Methodist minister in the East End of London. He learned that an old man was gravely ill and called on him. It was at once made plain that he was an unwelcome visitor, for as soon as the sick man caught sight of Lax's clerical collar he turned his head and refused to utter a word. While trying to sustain a conversation Lax noted the dreariness of the room, the pitifully small fire, and suspected that provisions had run low. When he left he went to a butcher shop and had two lamb chops sent to the house. He called again a few days later and through the old man was still far from talkative he was disposed to be friendly. On the way home another order was left with the butcher. By the third visit there was a pronounced change in the patient. He was congenial and even expansive, and before taking leave of him Lax read from the scripture and prayed. A preaching engagement took him out of London for some days. When he got back he was informed that the old man had died and had left a message for him. Just at the last when he could barely speak he made a sign that he wanted to say something. 'Tell Mr. Lax,' he gasped, 'it's all right...I'm going to God...but be sure to...tell him...that it wasn't...his preaching that changed me...it was...those lamb chops.'* And McCracken continues, *These are days when Christians have to demonstrate that belief in the love of God is more than a beautiful and sentimental idea. It cannot exist side by side with indifference to human need. It has to be translated into concern for people. It must find expression in action and in loving, self-denying service.*

And a half-century later another minister confronted his own mortality and in so doing discovered the heart of his faith. His name is William Forbes, a Presbyterian who has served congregations as well as the church's pension board. Last year he had pancreatic cancer, which he has, to this point, survived. While acknowledging the work of the church and the issues it faces as important, this summer he offered this critique and advice: *The business we consider in our [denominational meetings] is important. The same can be said for any [synod or church council] docket. But what is really important is more basic. How have I related and cared for those with whom I have come into contact today. Have I told my spouse how much I love and care for him or her? Have I told my children and grandchildren the same? Have I prayed for those who are in any particular need today – members of my congregation, family, circle of friends, the poor, the homeless, the imprisoned, those facing surgery? Have I reflected on how incredible the gift of life really is? Have I given thanks for the multitude of blessings in my life? The issues faced by any [denominational meeting] really do matter, but what is really important and essential*

*are the things we so often take for granted. We must not lose our zeal and enthusiasm for those issues facing the church. At the same time, our first priority can and should be those we encounter today. Reach out to one another. Love one another. Pray for one another without ceasing, and let people know you are praying for them. Pray for our church. Comfort those in need. Attempt to be Christ-like in all your interactions. Smile and laugh more. Frown less. Smell the fragrances of life. Enjoy the simple pleasure of life. Slow down. This is more than a stop and smell the roses speech, but that which points to the way of the heart that reaches out from the heart.*

Over the centuries, beginning with the early followers of Jesus, volumes of guides to the Christian life have been written. The strict traditions of the Pharisees, the codes of conduct of various sects, the rules of the Benedictines and other monks, the polities of denominations, the membership standards of congregations, educational curricula and behavioral expectations – all have their value and place in guiding us pilgrims along what can sometimes be a very complex, a very difficult, a very bumpy road of following Jesus. But none is greater than the instruction to take the love of God's own heart, the love God has placed in our hearts by unending grace, and do God's work of loving the world. Amen.