

Psalm 27 Deuteronomy 8:1-3; 11-20 St. James 1:17-21 St. John 16:5-15

Living out the Gospel

Mission Statement: The Anglican Church of St. George the Martyr is a community of believers in Jesus Christ seeking to live out the Gospel among ourselves, seeking to take the Gospel to the world, and committed to being Biblical in our faith, liturgical in our worship, and evangelical in our witness.

2. We seek to live out the Gospel among ourselves:

We endeavor to uphold and practice the ancient Sacraments, enhance the prayer life of our parishioners, lead them in discipleship and in ministries of mercy and hospitality, help to identify and encourage the use of each one's unique spiritual gifts, and to provide learning opportunities for members to love one another as Christ loves us.

My son Hanno and his wife Lauren recently gave us a book entitled "The Cat and the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age" written by Douglas A. Hall. Louise and I decided to include the reading of this book as part of our regular morning devotions and so far we have found it both refreshing as well as challenging. For instance, in Part One, Hall writes about his "desire to not only believe the Bible, but to *do* it". He says, "My growing desire was that my life should be so lived that people would look at it over time and not merely say, "This is a Bible-believing person," but that people could see that the things that happened in the Bible also happened in my life, that in my day I had been part of what God was doing, that I had participated in events that confirmed and expressed the message of His written Word. I felt that a quest for truth should not merely be an earnest desire to know truth cognitively, although that is certainly involved, but also a passion to find out how to do the truth experientially."

Then, as a definition he adds, “I call this concept “doing the Bible.” Please understand I mean more than “doing what it says,” which is a starting point. By “doing the Bible,” I mean that I want to see that the things that happen in my life are biblical things, the experiences I have are biblical experiences, and the patterns I see working in my life I also see working in the lives of people in the Bible.” (Hall, Douglas, The Cat & the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age, Urban Voice Series, WIPF & STOCK, Eugene, OR, 2010, 12.)

Now, obviously, this is not something anyone can teach you to do...this is something you need to figure out for yourself while striving to live out what you read in the Holy Scriptures yourself from day to day. However, this is something we as individual members of our Lord’s Body ought to be striving towards. Especially since our *Membership Requirement Pamphlet* says as much...remember item number 3? “Conduct Expected of Members.” “Since the Church of Jesus Christ is made up of those who are forgiven, have God’s Law written on their minds and hearts, and who worship Him in Spirit and in truth, we expect our members to evidence their spiritual union with Christ *by obedience to the Holy Scriptures.*” Time does not permit me to quote from the 3 points under the heading “Individual Responsibilities”, but each one of these points is simply saying that our members ought to live out what they profess to believe in all areas of life. But the point that best illustrates the section of our Mission Statement we are examining today is the last part of point 3 under the heading “Church Responsibilities”, and I quote. “Members are therefore encouraged actively to cultivate acquaintance with one another so that they may be better able to pray for one another; love, comfort, and encourage one another; bear with one another and forgive whatever grievance they may have against one

another; and help one another materially as necessity may require.” This point surely covers a number of ways in which we can “do the Bible” or to live out the Gospel among ourselves, don’t you think?

Now, the Epistle of James from which we read a portion for our Epistle lesson for today, is a letter that focuses on “doing the Bible”...for James faith on it’s own is not only not enough, it is dead. For faith to be real faith or biblical faith, it has to work...it has to produce fruit...it has to be visible and observable and measurable...and it ought to inspire change and action on the part of those who do the observation. The life of a true Christian ought to positively challenge those who are not Christians...as someone once said, our lives may be the only Bible some people will ever get to read.

But the sad thing about the modern church is that it seems as if no one has ever read the Epistle of James! For example, James tells us that faith endures trials...but most Christians today are just like the world! When the going gets tough, they get going elsewhere...be that church or marriage or a job...and so we have a generation of Christians who have no tested and tried character...a bunch of self-centered, immature, babes in Christ. Or, in James’ own words, we are double-minded people, unstable in all our ways. And, oh boy, do we let God have it when things go wrong! It’s all His fault, when in reality, it is more often than not a consequence of our own bad choices when we allow our own desires to draw us into sin. And the reason the modern Church is so incredibly shallow and so alarmingly unlike our Lord is simply because most Christians are not even hearers of God’s Word, much less doers of His Word. We don’t “do the Bible”...and more often than not we blame even this on others...well, nobody told me how to do it. Sorry, folks, we all have the same Word and we all have the same Holy

Spirit Who has been poured out on us all...according to Jesus, He is the One Who leads us into all truth and if we have been misguided we only have ourselves to point a finger at.

Besides, think of all the opportunities for growth presented here at St. George's. There are the regular Eucharist services in which we participate in the historical worship of the Church. Our liturgy can be traced back all the way to the inception of the Church and, indeed, perhaps even further as the Christian Liturgy was adapted from the ancient liturgy of the Jews. And may I remind you that our services are not solely about the sermon (although it does help to have a good one from time to time), but our services are about meeting with the risen, living Jesus...when you come to partake of the elements of the Eucharist, you are coming into His presence as His Body. Then we also have opportunities for practical study, such as our excellent Sunday-School classes for adults and our younger folk, our confirmation classes, and our Bible Studies for both women and for men. We also have many projects, which if you will just get involved in them, will lead you into ministries of mercy and hospitality. Every year Deaconess Debbie puts on an excellent Ministry Fair to help you slot in with whatever team could use your unique spiritual gifts. Take advantage of this and learn to do the Bible. We offer many learning opportunities for you to move your inward focus outward...how often haven't we been granted the privilege of helping our own members get through tough times not to mention helping others outside of our own community? For a church our size and with the limited number of staff and leaders we have and our minimal resources, I think we provide adequately for all...of course, we could do better, but we can only do better if you are all willing to pitch in yourself, give a helping hand and be a servant rather than a

master or mistress...or hoping that someone will do something, which is, of course, the best way to ensure that nothing gets done by anyone...

Be that as it may, from our Epistle reading, we may glean four main lessons to help us get ourselves pointed in the right direction. First of all, we need to acknowledge our dependence on God Who Alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinners such as we are. God Alone is able to grant us a love for the things He commands and a desire for what He has promised. He Alone can fix and focus our hearts where true joys are to be found. As we saw last week in our Gospel lesson, without God we are not able to do anything. We must be in the true Vine and remain in the true Vine if we are to bear fruit to His glory and for His honor.

Secondly, we need to understand the purpose of God's gifts to us. He has given us our abilities and talents to use for the extension of His kingdom, as it is His concern to reconcile all to Himself...we are only the firstfruits of His creatures...there are many more sheep yet to be included in the fold. We are not gifted to build our own little kingdoms...although by the actions of many Christians one would be forgiven for thinking that God had absolutely nothing to do with their gifts and abilities...that they are simply of their own making and therefore for their own personal pleasure and purposes. But that is not what the Scriptures teach us. God is the giver of all good gifts and consequently everything good about us has been given to us from above. Therefore, our gifts are to be used first and foremost for His pleasure and His purposes. And the primary gift God has given us, other than our Lord Himself, is His Word...the Word of Truth, which the Spirit of Truth not only "implants" in us, but also uses to bring forth growth in us. When we use that same Word to change our lives so as to reflect the One

of Whom it speaks, we become mirrors of the Word...and those who observe our lives may then see the truth lived out or fleshed out in much the same way people who met Jesus would have seen the Word lived out or fleshed out. Striving to live out God's Word in our every day lives helps us to avoid being pegged as people who live lives contrary to our own profession of faith. So, the same Word through which (or better, through Whom) we have been granted a new life and a new nature is the Word we need to incarnate before the world so that they, in turn, might turn from death to life.

Thirdly, we must learn to abstain from all forms of sinful self-expression by striving rather to give expression to our new God-given desires. We are actively and purposefully to lay aside those things that we once did so that we may consciously strive to put on those things that we learn in God's Word. Many think that this is hard to do. It is so hard to stop gossiping...it is so hard to stop myself from getting angry...it is so hard to refrain from delivering that raunchy joke...it is so hard not to fool around with Internet pornography...it is so hard to get up on Sunday mornings to come to church...and so on and so forth. But is it really? Think about the one sinful habit you think impossible to break. Now, if I were to promise to give you a million dollars (assuming that I had a million dollars to give, that is) if you would stop doing, saying, thinking, dreaming whatever it is you think impossible to stop for just one week, chances are, you would be able to stop doing it for that one week. So, by stopping it for a week (or if we want to lower the stakes a bit, for just one day or even just one hour) you have already proved that you can stop it if you really put your mind to it...if you think it worth your while. So, so why are you not able to stop it entirely? Why? Well, because you don't really want to, that's why. You really don't actually want to....

Which leads to the final lesson James teaches us here which is that if the Word is to be fully and effectively heard, received, applied and lived out, we must give to its Author our ready and steady heart submission. The only remedy for a self-oriented and self-centered and selfish life is to make your love for God your primary focus...your number one priority...and the only way to do this, is to learn to doggedly persist in doing the Bible...Jesus teaches us that if we love Him, we will show that love through our obedience to His Word. Think about a household pet. How do we get them to live in harmony with the rest of the household? Well, if an animal can learn to do the will of its Master or Mistress, why cant' you?

The bottom-line is, dearest beloved brethren, that if we are serious about seeking to live out the Gospel among ourselves, we will firstly have to know what that Gospel says by reading the Word and then secondly, we will have to do it...live it out...incarnate it...make it so part of the warp and woof of our being that we cannot but reflect the One of Whom it speaks. We will have to be determined to turn from our propensity to self-reliance, self-satisfaction, self-elevation and self-fulfillment and to use the good gifts we have been given for the edification of others...not ourselves.

And what better place to renew our determination to be like the One we believe in than here at His Table where we observe the selfless, God-centered actions of the Word incarnate, our Lord Jesus Himself? So, as you come to partake of this ancient Sacrament, dearest brethren, ask Him Who always did what pleased His Father to so work in your heart that you too may strive always to do only the Bible, so that together we all may live out the Gospel among ourselves and, indeed, among all.