

**A Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost
at St. John's Church, Norwood Parish
17 September 2006**

Proper 19: James 2:1-5,8-10,14-18; Mark 8:27-38

A briefer than usual sermon for a Sunday with a jam-packed schedule.

Almost everything about my life as a priest is enormously gratifying, and I consider it an honor to be known as a priest. There are occasions, however, when I try to keep my priestly identity to myself; times when it is better to go out in public *incognito*, wearing a regular shirt rather than my usual black clergy shirt with its round-white clerical collar. Among them are when traveling by public transportation – the Metro, train or plane, or at certain public receptions, because on these occasions, captive in my seat, blocked in the aisle or standing with plate and glass in hand, people will come up to me and seemingly ask for absolution for not attending church. Somewhere in the predictable litany of excuses will come this line: "While I am not very religious, I am a 'spiritual person'" or "I am a believer." To which all I can respond under the circumstances, is to smile and nod and say something non-committal like, "Good for you," "well of course" or "glad to hear it." All I'd really like to do is get back to my reading or the food on my plate. And what I would like to say, is to paraphrase part of our reading from James, "Your spirituality is dead and useless."

But of course, I don't say that, and it would not be entirely true. A "religion-less spirituality" has its uses. A sort of free-floating, high-minded recognition and awareness of the transcendent realities of life has its pleasures; such spirituality, without any anchors, makes no demands, and asks no sacrifices. There are no sign-up sheets, and no pledge envelopes. But such a spirituality is entirely personal; an entirely private realm. Such a spirituality makes no connection with others, not with family, not with friends, not with a broader fellowship; and it makes no connection with the God revealed in any spiritual tradition, whether of the East or the West. It is in this sense that religion-less spirituality is useless. Because making connections, is what religion does: Connections with one another; connections with the realities of this life; and connections with the divine. Religion, *re-ligare*, literally, binds us together one with another and with God.

James writes that the life of faith involves work; a useful spiritual life involves connection with God and one another in tangible, effective, life-changing ways. James is adamant that concern for the well-being of others is part of a faithfulness grounded in the life and witness of Jesus. It is not enough to merely wish others well-clothed and well-fed with pious-sounding expressions of good will. A useful spirituality, a living faith, will make connections with the needs of others, and with the challenges of the world today:

Connections grounded in the stories of God's people, connections anchored in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Making these connections is the work of all our Christian Education programs. On this first Sunday of a new year of Church School, we commission our teachers; we begin a new season of Parish Hall Forums, parenting forums and Bible Study; Wednesday Morning Bible study has begun anew, the Wednesday evening scripture and theology class about "This Fragile Earth" will begin this week, and the Introduction to St. John's workshops are on the calendar for later this month. All these efforts are about connecting the stories of our lives to the story of God revealed to us in Jesus: Connecting the brokenness in our lives and in the life of this broken and hurting world, to the story of God's redeeming love.

It may sound in today's Gospel reading as though Jesus is asking us to look around for a cross to pick up. Jesus knows better. We do not have to look for crosses in this life; they are part of the reality of the lives we are called to live, and of the world in which we have been placed. And just as Jesus was broken on the hard wood of the Cross, and then raised to life anew; so our lives are raised to new life if we cling to the hope of his Cross. But it is not just pain, sorrow and loss that break our lives open to the new and Risen Life; our lives are broken open with all the changes that life brings - new relationships, pregnancy and childbirth, children going to school for the first time, or away to college - leaving an empty nest at home, and also the joy of discovery, of new opportunities, of meaningful service, all these break us open and forge new connections binding us together with one another and to God.

And so, as a new season also begins for the Alleluia Choir, the St. John's Choir and the Norwood Ringers, as the Altar Guild shifts our focus back to the High Altar, as the Flower Guild brings the beauty of nature to our worship, as we gear up for the Treasure Sale, as the Outreach Committee leads our response to the needs of our community - and especially as they lead us in a literal response to James' reminder that we are called to feed the hungry in a hands-on fashion at Shepherd's Table and to clothe those in need through the Bethesda Cares Clothing Closet in our building, as the Opportunity Shop serves both its customers and its community of volunteers, as we gather at Wednesday noon to pray for healing, and Wednesday evening for Centering Prayer - both sustaining the life of this parish, and as we discuss, debate and dream about how to best sing the praises of God in this place, ours is a spirituality grounded in Christ. Ours is a living faith anchored in the love of God and neighbor, of steadfast concern for all, shaped and inspired by the worship we share.

And I just have to think that St. James would be pleased. Amen.

Harrison West+