

PENTECOST 15B - 9/2/18

Just Do It

(James 1:17-27)

This morning we are going to embark upon a five-week sermon series based on the New Testament letter of James. You see, today and for the next four Sundays, our second readings are all taken from that particular book; a book that has not always been especially well-liked or well-received (to be perfectly honest) – including Martin Luther himself apparently. But a book which contains, I think, some excellent wisdom and practical advice for Christian living; that is, for living out the life of faith...

But I would first like to begin my sermon this morning with a little culture quiz; specifically the effectiveness of advertising. So, see if you can identify the following companies and/or products by their famous advertising slogans. For example:

- “It’s the real thing” (Coke)
- “Mmm Mmm good” (Campbell’s Soup)
- “It keeps going and going and going” (Energizer batteries)
- “Can you hear me now?” (Verizon)
- “Live in your world, play in ours” (PlayStation)
- “What’s in your wallet?” (Capital One)

Here’s some more; classic oldies but goodies:

- “I can’t believe I ate the whole thing.” (Alka Seltzer)
- “Where’s the beef?” (Wendy’s)
- “A little dab’ll do ya” (Brylcreem)
- “They’re great!” (Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes)
- “When you care enough to send the very best” (Hallmark cards)

- “Builds strong bodies 12 ways” (Wonder Bread)

Not bad. Actually, you did really well!

Finally, here’s one of the most iconic of all advertising slogans and, arguably one of the most effective ad campaigns, of all time. In fact, its credited with increasing the company’s domestic market share from 18%-43%, and worldwide sales from \$877 million to \$9.2 *billion* during the years from 1988 to 1998, after it was first introduced.

The slogan? “Just Do It.” (Of course it’s Nike.)

Back during the 1980’s, Nike was locked in a stiff competition with its archrival, Reebok, which was benefitting from its own campaign aimed primarily at, and in response to, the aerobics craze that was sweeping across the nation at that time. So Nike devised *its* entire campaign to target *all* Americans, regardless of age, gender, or fitness level. The idea was simple. No matter who you are or what you do, get out there and... *just do it!*

Just do it... But believe it or not, Nike didn’t really invent that slogan. Or at least not its message. Because many many years ago, centuries in fact, to be more precise nearly two millennia, a leader in the early church named James said something very similar, as we heard in our second reading this morning. “But be *doers* of the word,” he wrote, “and not merely hearers....” Or, to put it another way, “Just Do It.”

A quick word, though, *about* this James before we try and unpack what he meant when he said, “Be doers of the word...” You may recall that there were two of Jesus’ twelve disciples with the name of James. There

was the one who was a fisherman along with his brother John; James and John. And together with that other fisherman named Peter, they then comprised Jesus' so-called inner circle since the gospels frequently record key moments in Jesus' ministry when he was accompanied by, or in the presence of, these three in particular: Peter, James, and John.

This James is sometimes known as James "The Greater" or James "The Great" in recognition of his important standing among the twelve. But that's not the James we're talking about here.

Then, in the lists of the disciples in the gospels, there was also a James the son of Alphaeus as well. He is often referred to as James "The Lesser" or James "The Less," presumably to distinguish him from the other, apparently more important, James; again, James the Greater. But this is not the James we're talking about here *either*.

You see, in Matthew 13, and also Mark 6, we are told that Jesus was rejected when he came to preach in his hometown of Nazareth. They had a hard time, apparently, connecting this famous teacher and miracle worker with the boy they had seen grow up in their midst. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?" the people in the synagogue wanted to know. "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?"

And then we hear *this*: "And are not his brothers *James*... and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" In other words, Jesus had four younger brothers, we're told (and at least a couple of sisters as well, according to these passages in Matthew and Mark.) And one of these younger brothers

was named James. And it is *this* James, then, that we are talking about here this morning; *this* James who wrote the New Testament book bearing that name, and from which our reading this morning was taken.

Jesus had a little brother; one who, as it turns out, became a *leader* in the early church in his own right. Talk about going into the family business!

The Christian comedian known as Michael Jr. has a funny routine about James, Jesus' lil' brother. As he likes to point out, "Wow! How much pressure was that?" Now virtually every younger sibling with a famous, or talented, or well-liked, older brother or sister can probably identify with that. Right?

Michael Jr. goes on, "Jesus your big brother? How many times did he have to hear, 'How come you can't be more like Jesus, James?'" Whether that really happened or not, is impossible to know, of course. But it *does* make you think, doesn't it?

Well I'll share further details, about James himself in the coming weeks. But, for now, what I want you to remember is that the author of these readings we'll be focusing on – at least according to tradition, that is – was none other than James, the younger brother of Jesus...

Now back to this morning's reading. "Just do it," says James. "Be doers of the word, and not merely *hearers* who deceive themselves."

A little earlier in our reading, James offered this: "...let everyone be quick to listen...." So hearing *is* important. It's not irrelevant. In life, you want to listen to good advice. At school, you want to listen to

the teacher's instructions. At work, you want to listen to your boss' directions. And, as Christians, we of course want to listen to the Word of God. We want to be informed by the lessons of scripture. We want to be shaped by, and have our actions reflect, the teachings of the Bible. Although, we *do* want to make sure that we're hearing things correctly, though.

An 82-year-old man named Morris went to his doctor for a physical. A few days later, the doctor saw Morris walking down the street with a gorgeous young woman on his arm. A couple of days after that, the doctor had a chance to speak with Morris again, and said, "You're really doing great, aren't you?" And Morris replied, "Just doing what you said, Doc, 'Get a hot mama and be cheerful.'" To which the doctor responded, "That's *not* what I said, Morris. What I *said* was 'You've got a heart murmur. Be careful!'"

But, assuming that we've *heard* correctly, that's still not enough, says James. We then have to translate what's been heard into action. Again, we have to "do it," and not just "hear it."

In the late 70's and early 80's in Brooklyn, New York, there was a pharmacy operated by a man named Steve Smolin. One of his part-time workers was his mother-in-law, Marlene. She would constantly and annoyingly question Steve's instructions about the day to day operations; as in, "Why *can't* I stock the Mylanta next to the vitamins?"

Exasperated, Steve would finally have to end the ensuing ten minutes of bickering and reasoning with a final command: "Marlene, JUST DO IT!" The bickering would then come to a screeching halt, and Marlene would sheepishly stock the Mylanta in its appropriate place.

Anyway, it was not too long, however, before the rest of the store's help, mostly local high school kids, picked up on this and began parroting this directive when addressing each other; as in "Mario, JUST DO IT!" The small store soon reverberated with this exhortation multiple times a day. In fact, within a short time, the pharmacy crew took this directive out to the streets. If a player refused to play right field in the softball game, the rest of his schoolyard team would inevitably shout out, "Nunzio, JUST DO IT!" And when these same kids would later join the Bensonhurst auxiliary police, and one of the own would balk at answering a particular call from the dispatcher, dozens of police radios would simultaneously bellow out, "Lenny, JUST DO IT!" In fact, by the early 80's, someone even came to the pharmacy owner and said, "Steve, you're famous; your slogan is barked out on every schoolyard and basketball court in Bensonhurst."

Well, "Just Do It," in a sense, helped make James famous as well. You see, in those early days of the church, when those very first Christians were trying to figure out exactly what their faith meant for daily living, James, among others, came along and said, "Just do it." Live it. Even if you don't feel like it – maybe *especially* if you don't feel like it. Just do it!

But just do *what*? Well, going back to that earlier portion of this morning's reading that I mentioned a little bit ago, James observes, "You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone (again) be quick to listen." But then he adds, "slow to speak and slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

The Greek philosopher, Diogenes, famously pointed out, "We have two ears and one tongue so that we would listen *more* and talk *less*." Not

only listen more, says James, but listen *first* as well; before we even speak, in fact. In other words, don't rush to speak until you have taken the *time* to listen, and to listen *well*, first...

And then also be "slow to anger," he says. Slow to take offense. Slow to jump to conclusions. Slow to believe mean-spirited, malicious gossip that gets you all worked up. Why? "...for your anger does not produce God's righteousness," we heard. Uncontrolled, festering anger is, quite simply, not the Christian way of living; it's not what God wants for our lives.

Dave Veerman, of the Christian organization Campus Life, once related this story. "A while ago," he says, "our family began to memorize scripture, one verse a week. Because my daughters were ages ten and six, I thought this was about the right speed..."

"One evening, as my wife and I sat reading, we heard the girls fighting down the hall. 'I hate you!' one yelled and the other responded in kind. Not wishing to jump headlong into the fray, I called back, 'Kara?' She answered, 'Yes?' Hoping to quiet the fight, I asked, 'What is our verse for this week?' She quickly answered in her most pious voice, 'Dear friends, since God loved us as much as that, we surely ought to love each other too, 1 John 4:11.' And then she resumed the fight.

"I tried the same tactic with Dana, and with the same results. My wife and I couldn't help laughing. And then, of course, I had to go back and intervene."

It's a perfect illustration of what James is teaching us here, isn't it? We can hear scripture; even memorize and repeat it flawlessly. But, as Dave

Veerman notes, "...Christianity is not so much about knowing facts as about living. We must get the Bible off the *shelf* and into the *self*," he writes.

So what are we to do? Again, "Be *doers* of the word," says James. "Just do it." Because those who are "hearers" of the word, and not "doers, he says, "deceive themselves." In fact, he compares them to those who look in the mirror and, immediately upon walking away, completely forget what they look like.

Because the mirror, you see, reflects what we *really* look like, who we really *are*. But, if you walk away and forget, then you deceive yourself, he says.

As Andrew Schroer, a Lutheran pastor, once noted, "You know, I can *think* that I look like Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise, but when I look at myself in the mirror, I know the truth. When we look in the mirror of God's law," he says, "we see ourselves as we really are. We see that we don't live up to what God demands."

But those who *do not* deceive themselves, those who look into the mirror, who look into the *perfect* law, says James, and persevere; in other words, those who are *not* simply hearers who forget, but doers who act – *they* will be blessed in their doing. In other words, those who strive to live out the Christian faith in their daily lives. Not that they ever truly succeed or achieve perfection. But it's the effort, it's the *doing*, that counts. Or, as Martin Luther once observed, "The world does not need a definition of religion as much as it needs a *demonstration*."

I'm reminded here of the famous bodybuilder, turned action movie star, turned California governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Back when he was competing in bodybuilding competitions, Schwarzenegger would stand in front of the mirror for hours on end evaluating his appearance and progress. And if a particular body part was not up to his high standards, then he would work on it all the more in order to improve it.

A case in point were his calf muscles. Not only were they not naturally large to begin with, but they also stubbornly resisted his attempts to *improve* their appearance as well. Now when other bodybuilders had weak spots in their own physiques, it was common for them to hide these flaws and cover them up. Not Arnold. Instead, he cut off his sweat pants at the knees in order to see his calves each and every time he looked in the mirror. And seeing them as they really were, then *motivated him* to work them that much harder in order to improve their size and appearance.

It's kind of the same here for James. Don't ignore your flaws, he seems to be saying. Instead, see them for what they are and then work on them, persevere in living out your faith; be doers.

Just do it... There's an amusing story from General Stonewall Jackson's famous Valley Campaign during the Civil War. Jackson's army found itself on *one* side of the river when it needed to be on the *other* side. So he ordered his engineers to plan and build a bridge so the army could cross. Then he called his supply officer in to tell him that it was urgent for the wagon train of equipment and supplies to cross the river as soon as possible. So the supply officer started gathering all the logs, rocks, and fence rails he could find in order to build a bridge.

Early the next morning, even before daylight, General Jackson was informed by his supply officer that all the supply wagons and artillery pieces had crossed the river. Jackson then asked where his engineers were, and what *they* were doing. He was informed that they were still in their tent drawing up plans for a bridge... Just do it.

So here we are at the close of the first sermon in our series on the book of James. Be doers of the word, says James...

A man once walked into church late one Sunday and asked one of the ushers, "Is the sermon done yet?" The usher replied, "The sermon has been preached, but it has yet to be *done*."

As Yohan Perera has observed, "The word of God is not just meant to be preached. It's meant to be practiced. It's not just meant to be delivered, it's meant to be done!"

Just do it.

Amen.