

INSIDE OUT

Sermon for Pentecost 13, Proper 17B – Jas 1:17-27; Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
LPC, 8/30/09 (8:00 only)

I had a friend who returned to school after raising three children, to get an education degree and teacher's certificate. She once told me about an experience she had in a class on pedagogical theory (in other words, the science of teaching.) The professor was expounding upon an educational method that my friend knew well. She had tried it with her children. And it had failed with them. She wondered if she should say something. On the one hand, who was she compared to this professor with all the letters after his name? She was just a housewife and mother. On the other hand, all around her in the classroom were younger, quite earnest, students taking down the man's words as if they were gospel, while she knew that, at least in some circumstances, the words were false.

My friend's moral dilemma is not the focus of this sermon however. I tell the story as an example of a situation where dealing solely in the realm of theory can lead a person astray. The professor's theories sounded good. They could be proven using plausible axioms and the Socratic method. But they were faulty in the real world.

The world of concepts, ideas and ideals is admittedly a lofty world. Big thoughts lift human beings out of themselves. Heavenly visions expand the mind, swell the heart and nurture the soul. The letter-writer James must have been writing to people who had been uplifted in these ways by hearing about the gospel of Jesus Christ. James is glad his correspondents have been inspired, but he also feels impelled to offer a warning.

James' correspondents evidently are in danger of navel-gazing. At the very least they are not translating their ecstatic, inner experiences into the real world. Religion that remains at the conceptual level, says James, is no religion. True religion finds expression in the real world: by pure and generous behavior with real people. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers," says James. If you remain in the world of ideas only you're as foolish as someone who can't even remember what he looks like after leaving the mirror.

In other words, though religious conversion takes place on the inside of a person, it is an incomplete conversion unless it finds itself to the outside of a person.

In a way, Jesus (in today's reading from Mark) seems to be dealing with the opposite problem, as he squares off with the Pharisees and Scribes. The Pharisees and Scribes evidently have no problem with *their* outside behavior. They observe all the rules in the "real world." They can display their clean fingernails and their gleaming vessels as physical proof of their religious observance. The problem is that their religion is *all* on the outside. It's all in the "real world:" all on the surface. The clean fingernails and gleaming vessels are as far as their religion goes. There's nothing of God behind it at all. There is no "there" there.

What Jesus, and also James, seem to be calling for is “inside-out religion.” This is religion that is “implanted” (to use James’ word) by God Godself. Inspiration and conversion come from God alone. God alone implants God’s word *inside* a person. God’s word, if it is allowed, grows and multiplies within a person and overflows to the outside in holy behavior, manifesting itself in selfless service to others, on the outside of a person.

The motion is inside out. If there is no motion, if God’s implanted word, God’s inspiration, remains on the inside, it languishes. And outward activity, if it does not flow from the word of God within, is hollow.

For those of us who were implanted with God’s saving word at baptism, what does it mean when our outward actions do not reflect this inward grace? It means the flow of God’s inward grace is being impeded somehow. The solution would appear not to be trying harder to do more *in the world*, but to return to that implanted word inside: to loosen the soil, water and feed the seedling, perhaps do some inner pruning.

This is figurative language of course. What returning to the inner, implanted word means in practical terms is to pray, spend time with God, read scripture, consult with other Christians. These things break the dams that our self-centered, self-protective egos erect within us to impede the growth and outflow of God’s implanted word. Returning to the inner, implanted word by tending to one’s relationship with God lets the implanted word grow within until it can overflow in outer actions. Then a person must be ready to allow the word to overflow in outer actions. Merely thinking about how nice outer actions would be doesn’t count.

We cannot live inside ourselves, ignoring the outside world. We cannot totally live in the outside world, neglecting the health of our inner soul. God wants us to be engaged on the inside and on the outside. The way to do that is to live inside out.