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September 20, 2009

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Hendersonville, North Carolina

***“Rhythms of Life: Part II”***

James 1:22-25

The world is in a constant state of arrhythmia.

We talked last week about the most powerful rhythm in the world being the heartbeat. Well, what if that heartbeat goes out of rhythm? (an arrhythmia). Then it needs a pacemaker. The world is in need of a pacemaker—shoot the Church is in need of a pacemaker. And that pacemaker is the word of God.

The Scripture in James today says “But be doers of the *word*, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

Doers of the word. This is the rhythm that we need.

But, ah, why does James have to talk about doing? For you touchy-feely people out there, I know what you’re thinking, “This topical series isn’t for me. Couldn’t you have chosen the Psalms or one of the gospels to preach a vision for the church? Not moral lessons (I like to call wisdom literature), not more ‘to do’s.’” You say, “I’m recovering from those churches that always emphasized doing—I just want to sit back and relax, take God in and feel good.” Well, this may be hard to swallow, but the message of Christ is not to be comfortable. Some days I wish it was. This is where the arrhythmia in the church begins. We spend more time and money on our insular and institutional agendas that we neglect the whole world.

James is all about faith and works together. Isn’t faith enough some say (which is why Martin Luther struggled with it, calling it an “epistle of straw”)? But what good is it going to do in Hendersonville, NC if we come up with a lot of good faith statements at Providence without any action? Does that help anyone? Does that influence the kingdom? I saw a bumper sticker this week that said, “My karma ran over your dogma.” I had to laugh, and then after being baffled by that statement for a while, I thought, perhaps they are onto something. Dogma gets us only so far.

Sometimes I wonder why after Sunday worship (after we’ve heard the sermon and sung the hymn of commitment), why we don’t go and “do.” If we just come here, week after week, to hear and take in, we’ll never grow, and truth be told, we’ll never grow as a church. Community is formed around mission, as some of us talked about last Sunday night.

We can’t just be hearers. For as it says, hearers are self-deceived. They think they’re doing something about it. But in reality they’re in denial. How many times is most of the “doing” done in our head?

Hearers are likened in this Scripture to those who forget—they've heard the word/call to action, but it doesn't take root in their heart like the seed that fell on bad soil or like looking in a mirror and then walking away and forgetting one's reflection.

The word has to go somewhere, it can't stay on the surface or else it will be forgotten. I keep hearing from people, "I can't remember anything anymore. I'll know it and then in ten seconds I'll forget it." Well, of course there are different reasons for that. But it is frustrating isn't it? And it's so common in all areas of our life. It's not enough to hear something and really care. We'll forget, our passion will wane, our memory will fade. Like the seed that fell on thorny soil, the cares of the world and the lures of wealth will come and steal away what we've heard.

The rhythm of the *word* calls us again.

But perhaps you are thinking this, "Okay, so it seems to me it is all about doing. And I just get stuck. I get overwhelmed."

But remember what the call is to "do." Doers of what? Doers of the *word*, which here is the word *logos*, which in its embodied, completed form means CHRIST. We are to be doers of Christ. What does that mean?

After eating part of his lambchop, Jesus gets up and takes off his outer garment. "Whoa, Jesus, what's going on?" The disciples say. He kindly ignores them, fills a basin with water. He kneels before Judas, first. Jesus picks up his first foot—there's mud and other excrement caked in between his toes. Jesus takes in a deep breath and holds his nose. He takes the cloth, dips it into his bowl and wrings out just enough water from the cloth to change the cake into softened clay. He begins to scrub Judas' feet, and finally wipes them down clean. He takes off the towel that he had wrapped around his waist, and dries his feet. He goes to Simon, then Philip, Peter, then Andrew, and so on. When he had finished, silently he went back, put his outer garment back on (the disciples watching him curiously, all the while). Then he set back down in his seat, looked down at the half-eaten lamb and then looking up, with great pause and deliberation, lips upturned and then relaxed, he says:

"Do you understand what I have done for you?"

Of course he goes on to say that as Teacher and Lord, he has washed their feet, so likewise they should go and do the same...BUT before they can "go and do" the question remains, "Do you understand what I have done for you?"

Before we can go and serve, be "doers" of the word, we HAVE to understand what has been done for us—that we have been set free by the Christ who loves us, even unto death.

As I've thought about it this week, I think there are three main reasons we struggle to be "doers of the word." The first is fear. In general, we are people who are afraid of what we don't know, what we've never done before. So if we've never worked at a soup kitchen, or talked to a homeless person or smelled the scent of death, we are apprehensive, and this holds us back.

Secondly, we aren't doers because we like our comforts.

Binx, the main character in one of my favorite novels, *The Moviegoer* by Southern writer Walker Percy is stuck in the last four years in Gentilly, a middle class suburb outside of New Orleans. Binx begins to feel a search awaken within himself. There's this search of something more than the life as he knows it, everydayness as he terms it.

Toward the beginning of the book he tells us about a conversation he has had with a friend named Eddie Lovell. He says this:

For ten minutes I stand talking to Eddie Lovell and at the end of it, when we shake hands and part, it seems to me that I cannot answer the simplest question about what has taken place. As I listen to Eddie speak plausibly and at length of one thing and another—business, his wife Nell, the old house they are redecorating—the fabric pulls together into one bright texture of investments, family projects, lovely old houses, little theater readings and such, It comes over me: this is how one lives!<sup>1</sup>

Ah the self-deception. For don't we all get caught in everydayness, where routine is the only rhythm we know, not the call to go beyond ourselves, to move away from the comfortableness that I spoke of last week, desiring more to be transformed and transformers: doers of the word.

The third and perhaps greatest reason we aren't better doers is because we're better guilters. We're so stuck in our guilt and get overwhelmed by planetary suffering that we just give up—never make it out the door. We're locked inside our mind.

Oh, we try. We try to serve out of guilt. But we never get there—Guilt is not the strongest motivator. We must be doers out of freedom—remembering the towel and basin, the sacrifice of Christ. That's what makes us again people of the gift. We've been given this incredible freedom in Christ—we can't do anything to earn it. Our only response is pure gratitude. Anne Lamott says there's really only two main prayers in this Christian journey: "Help me. Help me. Help me." And "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Let us not forget the rhythm of gratitude.

When we start thinking about doing, we get overwhelmed—so many poor people, sick people, unsheltered people—this should be the first reminder that we are not serving out of freedom. We are trying to be Christ ourselves—and this is where we stumble and fall. We will never save the world. That's Christ's job. We must live into the freedom that we have and out of this gratitude, faith, and love—serve others.

Lastly, I want to move us even more into expanding our concept of doing. Gordon MacDonald says, "The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Percy, "The Moviegoer," (New York: Vintage, 1998).

only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.”<sup>2</sup> This is or should be the church’s most important contribution.

Philip Yancey tells of the Italian novelist, Ignazio Silone, who writes a story about a revolutionary who is being hidden from the police. To give him a disguise, his friends dress him up as a priest and send him to a remote Italian village in the Alps. Pretty soon, villagers see a priest—and the word gets out that there is a priest, a man of God in their town. And soon there’s this long line of people waiting outside his house to confess their sins and share about their broken lives. These were people starving for grace.<sup>3</sup> Yancey believes that this is why people actually end up going to church, “out of hunger for grace.”<sup>4</sup>

This is what we have unique to offer, not that we just build houses together as a church with Habitat, or give money or goods to IAM, but we must be doers by extending grace to each and every person as we encounter them and form relationships with them. This to me is the supreme rhythm of life we need—the cure for our arrhythmia. What if we were defined that way—what if people said to someone asking about Providence—oh those are people of grace. That’s the rhythm they live by, living out of the grace of the one in whom we live, move and have our being.

The monastics formed “regulae”—community rules, documents which stated the essential rhythms of their shared life in Christ. I think so far we have studied some good rhythms or community rules to live by—being doers of the word by extending grace to oneself and neighbor, giving people presence—carving out space—quick to listen, slow to speak and anger; and all from the place of knowing that all is gift from God. “For every good and perfect gift is from above,” and all we can say is “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, “What’s So Amazing About Grace,” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.