



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE FIFTEENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

SEPTEMBER 1, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Any of us who are still on Facebook are familiar with the posts that provide a list of cities or countries and invite us to check off and post the number of the ones we have visited. Or it might be a list of books or movies. Or from the latest version I saw:

Never have I ever... skipped school, fired a gun, been on a train, eaten sushi, etc., etc., etc.

The whole list is attached. And my score was 10, 10 things I have never done, including for example, dyed my hair, gotten a tattoo, or gone zip lining. Maybe there's still time.

But why not the list of "evil intentions" from the Gospel according to Mark this morning? Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. Check them off and post the number on our Facebook pages. Incidentally, the Pastoral Office of Reconciliation of a Penitent – that's the fancy name for what more often has been called "confession" appears at page 447 of the Book of Common Prayer. Just give us a call...or just refer us to your Facebook page. By the way, that's one reason we never "friend" parishioners on Facebook. I guarantee no one ever would see my score on Mark's evil intention list. Let's just say it is ...humbling. At least, I have never murdered anyone.

But here is the question that came to my mind. Actually, two questions. First, what is "folly?" From the American Heritage Dictionary, courtesy of Google, folly is defined in multiple, similar ways:

Lack of good sense, understanding, or foresight.

"an act of folly"

An act or instance of foolishness.

"regretted the follies of his youth."

[which would take most of us back to that list of evil intentions]

A costly undertaking having an absurd or ruinous outcome.

...

The state of being foolish; want of good sense; levity, weakness, or derangement of mind.

Or as the Cambridge English Dictionary says most succinctly:

Folly is a noun that means the fact of being stupid...¹

Sadly, most of us have little problem knowing what most of the other listed evil intentions are.

But back to the more essential question: How do we know these enumerated evils are in fact evil? Even if we had never seen the Ten Commandments, wouldn't most of us know intuitively that we should not be killing other people, or stealing their stuff, or lying or cheating or slandering? Or betraying our marriage vows, envying our neighbors, or buying a yacht instead of fixing a leaky roof – that's folly, right, basically stupid? Even Forrest Gump knew that.

The great Christian apologist and author C.S. Lewis considers this ability to discern what is wrong or evil as some of the best evidence for God. It may also differentiate us from other animals, though I would hesitate to debate that with our Scottish terriers.

Which takes us to the rarely referenced letter of James:

[W]elcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.²

What does it mean to be implanted? The Greek word James used has two meanings, and he may have meant both of them. First, as C.S. Lewis would argue, implanted implies something innate, not acquired, something we are born with. It suggests that we know instinctively what is good and what is evil. No one needs to teach us or tell us that murder and theft for example, are wrong. Even if we never read the Bible or saw The Ten Commandments, our implanted, inborn conscience would guide us in our conduct. We are hard-wired to know the difference between right and wrong.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/folly>

² James 1:-- (NRSV).

Then there is another meaning that draws on the notion of a seed's being planted and the parable of the sower. Our conscience is formed by how we are taught and by what we choose to take in. God gave us Scripture, most notably, the Torah, the Law, including the Ten Commandments – and 603 others, by the way – as well as the prophets and sages, and, of course, the life, teaching, preaching, and example of Jesus Christ. And, dare we say, brilliant, evocative, edifying preaching in church. As the familiar parable warns us, we can take it or leave it, even ignore or resist it. And that is true whether we are talking about the innate knowledge of right and wrong that God implanted or the knowledge we implant from external sources also inspired by God for our edification.

Which makes James's insistence that we "welcome with meekness the implanted word" so meaningful. And here we run into another Greek word that James used that defies direct translation into English. Another translation says, "welcome with gentleness the implanted word." And I think it means we have to do better than take God's instruction in, hold it up to our own predilections and prejudices and then reject it. That is why James warns us to "rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness." Or as the King James translation says, "lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness." Never want to be naughty less than four months before Christmas.

James knew that when our minds are overcast with the dark clouds of evil, our receptiveness to God's word is diminished. Any teacher would tell us that no student will learn who resists being taught in the first place. James counsels instead that we be receptive, rather than resistant. That we cultivate a "teachable spirit."

And what is that? According to our oft-quoted 20th century Scottish theologian, author, and minister, William Barclay:

The teachable spirit is docile and tractable, and therefore humble enough to learn. The teachable spirit is without resentment and without anger and is, therefore, able to face the truth, even when it hurts and condemns. The teachable spirit is not blinded by its own overmastering prejudices but is clear-eyed to the truth. The teachable spirit is not seduced by laziness but is so self-controlled that it can willingly and faithfully accept the discipline of learning.

We have eyes to see and read, ears to hear, and billions and billions of brain cells that give us consciousness and the intellect and skill to select and process what we take in, whether implanted by God or derived from our study and experience in the world. As James says, we must “control everything in [our] nature which would be a hindrance to [our] seeing, learning and obeying the truth.”

Why is this so important? Because what did James insist? The “implanted word” has the “power to save our souls.”

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broken a bone	got a ticket
skipped school	gone scuba diving
fired a gun	eaten sushi
been skydiving	been to nyc
ridden in a limo	ran a marathon
had braces	got fake nails
had a massage	been on a train
gotten a tattoo	been in an ambulance
swam in the ocean	gone zip lining
dyed my hair	needed stitches
watched star wars	been camping
rode a horse	gone on a cruise