August 29, Ordinary 22B (James 1:17–27)

Hearing the word and doing it aren’t as far apart as Martin Luther thought.

by Austin Shelley in the August 11, 2021 issue

A wise pastor and mentor who spent a significant amount of time in Kenya once shared her favorite Kenyan proverb with me: “When you pray, always remember to move your feet.” If there is a book of the Bible that embodies this exhortation, it is the epistle of James.

Any decent study Bible’s introduction to James will mention its emphasis on moral action and attention to the social justice issues of its day. It will also mention Martin Luther’s displeasure over the epistle’s inclusion in the biblical canon. The Reformer considered James’s insistence on good works to be a detriment rather than an asset—an affront to Paul’s assertion in Galatians 2:16 that “a person is justified not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Luther questioned the letter’s apostolic authority and famously referred to it as “an epistle of straw.”

As a Presbyterian minister, I am an heir to the Protestant Reformation. My colleagues, congregation, and I espouse the priesthood of all believers, affirm that we are the church *reformed and always reforming*, and hold fast to the sacraments as visible signs of an invisible grace. We sing Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” with gusto on Reformation Sunday, and we sing the same hymn with lumps in our throats when we gather to bury a beloved saint of the church and to witness to the power of the resurrection: “Let goods and kindred go, / this mortal life also; / The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still, / His kingdom is forever.”

I am grateful for Luther and for the Reformation tradition that continues to shape my life and ministry and those of the people with whom I serve. Yet in order to maintain any semblance of integrity, we who love this tradition must be able to critique as well as praise it. I daresay Luther would agree, for he knew as well as anyone that to love an institution is to hold it accountable.

In that spirit of constructive critique, we might ask: Does Luther's wholesale dismissal of the letter fall short of appreciating James's gift for encouraging Christians to move their feet? Considering the circumstances of Luther's historical context and his role within it, is it possible that he misses James's nuance?

Luther understandably categorizes faith and works as separate entities—as opposite poles in a binary system. Based on this false dichotomy, Luther's objection to James's definition of faith makes sense. But Luther's beef with James ignores the fact that for the epistle writer, works arise as a natural outgrowth of *genuine* faith. For James, works tell the tale of whether true faith exists. The works themselves are not separate from faith but rather comprise an integral part of the whole, an interwoven manifestation of the commitment to live as a community of faith that acts accordingly "to care for orphans and widows in distress."

Nowhere is this sense of nuance more pronounced than in James's exhortation to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." Any first-century Jewish Christian worth her salt would have recognized in James's use of the word *hearers* an allusion to the *Shema*, a foundational verse of scripture found in Deuteronomy 6: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." One might think that James aims to "update" this law for the new Christians—to add *doing* to *hearing* as an act of Christian faith.

But such an assumption would diminish the full meaning of this basic building block of the Hebrew scriptures. Any rabbi friend or Hebrew lexicon will explain that the root for the Hebrew word *shema*, typically translated as "to hear," also carries a second, equally emphatic meaning: "to obey." This double meaning persists today, even in English translation. When I ask my children to "listen to me," I generally also expect them to do what I have asked. If they fail to obey, I might legitimately question whether they have heard.

The writer of James, therefore, remains faithful to the Hebrew scriptures by preserving the relationship between *hearing* God's word and *doing* what the Lord commands. Akin to the genitive relationship between faith and works later in the epistle, hearers and doers are not polar opposites; the posture of hearing produces obedient action, an experience which in turn opens the faithful person to a deeper relationship with the God who originates "every generous act of giving." Thus hearing God's word and obeying its statutes are bound together for the purpose of

providing care for the most vulnerable.

When we are hearers and doers who exhibit faith through works, we are praying while moving our feet.