



September 2, 2018 - A God Who Is Near Given by Rev. Mattei

Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have developed a [prototype "GPS"](#) for locating things inside the human body with a marker that can be swallowed instead of surgically implanted. It is hoped that this technology can eventually be refined to a level of accuracy which can be used reliably to detect tumors and inform cancer treatments. Maybe we don't need an internal gps to locate our evil intentions, but we would surely benefit from an alarm system that calls our attention to the evil thoughts of our mind and catch them before they get translated into questionable actions.

Martin Luther called the Letter of James a [straw epistle](#) with no much content, and Christians were warned not to pay much attention to it especially in light of more heavyweight books such as the gospel of John and the epistles of Paul and Peter. Especially the letters to the Christian communities in [Ephesus](#) and in [Rome](#) specify that salvation is given by grace through faith and is not our doing. That might be all that we need to know to understand God' precious gift to us. But as we read [Mark's gospel](#) it's easy to see how we may find our downfall when we focus in on ourselves: Jesus has strong words for those who lose track of the origin and meaning of their piety. Thus, James' recommendations are very appropriate and are meant to remind people of how our external behavior needs to reflect our internal commitment to God:

"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves..."
(James 1:22) "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless..." (James 1:26) and "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress..." (James 1:27)

Now, tell me that James was not serious and strong about what brings about the kingdom of heaven: salvation is indeed a gift and is made manifest in us by the way we live the Word. We may have integrity when our external behavior matches our internal spiritual world. We are not passive receivers of the gift, we are grateful receivers, who get on board with the plan to get to *know* God. The gift of the Spirit that brings us in a closer relationship with the Father in Jesus ought to be evident in the way we live, love

and labor. James calls us out of ourselves — away from the temptation to care for ourselves to the point of excess or at the expense of others as we hear about in Mark.

To the Pharisees, religion had the important role of strengthening people's ties with Yahweh by way of observing rules and regulations. The Israelites demonstrated their election among the nations and their identity as different than and separated from the other nations by the way they respected and fulfilled the precepts: [nothing should be added or deleted from God's commands!](#)

In the ritual prescriptions repeated by intentional habits the Israelites would find meaning, guidance, fortitude and solace.

We can easily say the same thing of our Lutheran liturgy with its (quasi) universal applications and consistency¹: we feel comfortable and competent when we do things that are familiar to us (perhaps that is the reason we don't fare too well with changes unless we understand the reasons behind the change). Traditionally, the liturgy facilitates our worship of God; it points us to God and is framed within a common spiritual and theological language. But it is possible to lose sight of the content of liturgy and become attached to its form, it's possible to lose track of the reason *why* we do *what* we do. It's also possible to absolutize the way we do liturgy to consider it the "only" way liturgy must be done, turning a means into a good in itself (and, therefore, turning it into an idol). That is why we have so many different liturgical settings to express not only a creative variety to worship God but also to prevent us from attaching ourselves to only one way of doing the liturgy.

Worship is centered around the One we declare to be our God. It is that part of our spiritual life when we affirm publicly in words and songs that we are aware of being part of a Being that is bigger than us, is in us and all around us. In worship we give all of ourselves to that ultimate Reality. Worship is the common time when we pay attention to the same Word being spoken to us; when we receive the one Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation and when the flame of the Spirit sparks in us collective responses multiplied in our individual actions in our individual contexts. Worship challenges us to realize that we have not always lived in integrity with what we have professed and we prostrate before God to confess our stubbornness and lack of generosity and receive divine forgiveness for renewed life. This is the time when our hearts sync with God's heart and with each others' hearts and are moved to advocate and act on behalf of the orphan and the widow and whoever else is suffering in today's world. Worship is finally the time when we profess our unity in the One true God and the desire to draw in close proximity with our Lord.

¹ Not all but most Lutheran churches in the US and Canada follow the same liturgy.

This past week the nation has said “Goodbye” to two giants of American life: Senator John McCain and soul singer Aretha Franklin. They were both giants because they both witnessed and lived in integrity the faith and values they embodied. Senator McCain made himself consistently vulnerable for the purpose of pursuing the wellbeing of the nation. In Senator Joe Biden’s [words](#), “[Sen. McCain] could not stand the abuse of power. Wherever he saw it, in whatever form, in whatever ways. He loved basic values, fairness, honesty, dignity, respect, giving hate no safe harbor, leaving no one behind and understanding Americans were part of something much bigger than ourselves.” He was a “man of character” and “we shall not see his like again”.

Aretha Franklin demonstrated her love for the Lord in her social activism. She deleted the spiritual/secular dividing line in her songs to the point of making it clear that one does not worship God only in church but in all that one does for one’s neighbor. Even her secular songs reflected the spiritual longing and mourning of a suffering people and a God who is so very near.

James reminds us that true religion includes being slow to speak, quick to listen and slow to anger, being doers of the word and not merely hearers. God calls us to undefiled religion, religion that “looks after the orphans and widows in their distress” and avoids being “polluted by the world.” True worship of God means putting God above everything and everyone; it means trusting God’s Word and doing God’s will even and especially when we don’t like it, even when we feel embarrassed, even when in our fear we are tempted to avoid or deny the truth.

May our worship of God be evident in the honesty and integrity we choose to pursue in the ordinary tasks of our life and may we deploy true religion by being slow to speak, quick to listen and slow to anger in our daily interactions for anger does not produce the righteousness of God.