

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well, what a difference a week makes!

Last weeks readings were a bit martial in character --

Putting on the whole armor of God and such.

This week we hear the lovesong of Solomon
and the gentle compelling words of James.

It makes for quite a contrast.

As James compares the importance of both hearing and doing,

while at the same time my mind is reflecting on the power of metaphor
and putting on the whole armor of God from last week,

I find myself drifting back

to a time when I strapped on my own armor
to do battle against the forces of evil.

Right near the end of my college career

I began playing fantasy role playing games.

It started with a group of about eight friends from High School.

We would gather every other Thursday

and play Dungeons and Dragons for three or four hours in the evening.

It was a great way to keep our friendships going

as well as make new ones.

It was a very social activity.

When all the big hub-bub about Dungeons and Dragons being devil worship
or somehow being the tool of the devil first surfaced

we all had a good laugh.

We looked more like a bridge party
than a coven of devil worshipers.

When D & D was blamed for the death of a young man in Michigan,

and negative sentiments began to be more and more wide spread,
And more adamant we began to wonder.
How could this game ever be equated with worship, devil or otherwise.
It's basically just a giant game of "Let's Pretend,"
a collective daydream of words.
Why was it so frightening?
About the only thing it shares with worship
is that it is difficult to explain and is really best experienced.
I remember when I first tried to explain D&D to my Dad
he asked questions like,
"What's the object?,
How do you win the game?"
I didn't have a very good answer.
The object is really just to spend time in a virtual world.
You don't try to win
so much as you try to live a life,
solving the various problems
that life in that virtual world presents you.
As a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings,
playing D&D was like spending time in the wonderful realm of Middle Earth,
a pleasant distraction from the work-a-day world,
of a budding young pharmacist.
This was way before computers had the power
to create virtual worlds like they can today.
We were stuck using more primitive,
though ultimately I think even more powerful tools,
spoken words.
It was something new.
No one had ever heard of virtual reality,

In fact the term hadn't even been coined yet,
and for adults to play in a land of make believe
seemed somehow wrong.

It had never been done before,
not because it couldn't,
but just because it hadn't.

In time role-playing would gain in popularity and acceptance,
And make the jump from the world of play
To the world of work.

But this was before all that.

So what does all this have to do with church this morning?

In our Gospel this morning

Jesus finds himself in a somewhat similar dilemma.

The disciples have been caught eating with defiled hands.

Not dirty per se,
but defiled.

In short, they had been washed incorrectly.

We in the Episcopal Church can identify with this frustration.

One of the legs of our favorite stool,
you know, that three legged one,
is tradition.

To review, our understanding

is that God's will is revealed to us
through a balanced testing of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

To rely overmuch on any one of the three
is to unbalance the stool and fall from grace.

It is a difficult and challenging task.

Much of the debate,
the good debate,

about the issues facing the Church today,
issues of gender, race, and care of creation,
is all about finding the right balance
of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

In the Gospel this morning,

Christ has come into conflict with a church overly bound to tradition.

Not only must the faithful wash their hands before a meal

(an eminently practical activity)

but they must wash them in a particular manner

for a particular period of time

(less than helpful to building up the faith of the community).

In an attempt to correct this imbalance,

Jesus tries to get the people to engage their reason.

We talk about the three legged stool like it was an Episcopal invention

and to some extent I guess it is,

but Richard Hooker only spelled out

and codified what he had received from his own study

of scripture and the faith of the church.

He didn't invent the three legged stool,

he only discovered it, so to speak.

In our Gospel today we see some of the evidence Richard Hooker found

To support his theory.

We see evidence of that grace filled interaction in practice

as Jesus attempts through the use of Scripture and reason

to correct a tradition gone awry.

As Episcopalians, and indeed as any person of faith,

it is our job,

among other things,

to be constantly about the work of discerning the will of God for us.

We must become adept at using our three legged stool,

And that comes best by practice.

The life of faith is not a passive one,

or an easy one.

It requires work,

The work, among other things,

of constant testing.

As an example,

I do not believe that D&D is a tool of the devil,

at least not the way I play it.

But I also know that at any given time it could be.

Not because it's D&D, but because anything could be.

Even the Bible can be turned to evil,

as we saw when the devil tempts Jesus in the wilderness by quoting scripture.

It is in our actions that evil is manifested,

not our tools.

Make no mistake about it,

The spiritual forces of darkness are out there,

seeking to do us ill.

Many have already fallen victim.

You can see the results of their work in our society.

It is a list you've heard before:

fornication, theft, murder,

adultery, avarice, wickedness,

deceit, licentiousness, envy,

slander, pride, folly.

All these evil things come from within,

and they defile a person.

But that must not be our way.

Listen again to the words of James.

“...he gave *us* birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

Though others may choose a different way,
even many others,

we must remember that we are a people
set apart to do things a different way.

James pleads with us to “understand this, my beloved:

let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak...
welcome with meekness the implanted word
that has the power to save your souls.”

Still, hearing is not enough, James continues with a warning.

“But be doers of the word,
and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...
those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere,
being not hearers who forget but doers who act-
they will be blessed in their doing.”

It is not enough for us to sit here on Sunday mornings

and listen to good words.

We must *learn* from them
and *act* on them.

There is only so much time that each of us have been given in this life.

In that time we can choose to make the world a better place, or not.

We can choose to work for the kingdom of God, or not.

As the old saying goes,
“All it takes for evil to win,
is for a good person to do nothing.”

So, pray God, let us this week, be doers of the Word.

Amen.