
What About the Eunuch?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17, Year B

I did not see it. No one else there seemed to see it either. You could not even tell from the video replay. But, the seasoned professional, Sahith Theegala, sensed it. He thought he saw some sand move and reported it to the rules official.

Theegala was playing his approach from a fairway bunker on the third hole. In the game of golf, you cannot touch the sand in a bunker while playing your ball. He did not mean to do it, but intent does not matter under the rule. So, Theegala was assessed the general penalty of two-strokes.

This all happened in the third round of the \$100 million Tour Championship at East Lake Golf Club yesterday. Theegala finished the day in third place. In other words, the penalty that Theegala called on himself could cost him millions of dollars.

"That stinks and that's pretty cool that he would admit it because no one else would have seen it," NBC analyst Brad Faxon said.

Theegala did not think about it, really. He had an intuition that he touched the sand, and he reported it.

Theegala was quoted as saying, "It was just unfortunate. But I did – pretty sure I breached the rules, so I'm paying the price for it, and I feel good about it At the end of the day, I'm good with the ruling, and it is very fair that I was assessed two shots."

It is a sign of character, isn't it?

Theegala felt like he broke the rules, so he reported it. That is what people of good character do. He did not like it. He did not gain anything from it. He just did it. As Bobby Jones famously said when people praised him for calling a penalty on himself, "You might as well praise a man for not robbing a bank."

This is the point that the author of the Book of James is making when he says, "become doers of the word and not simply hearers. That would be to deceive yourselves." (1:22, Translation by Luke Timothy Johnson). James does not want us to learn about faith just be able to talk about God. That just leads us into judging others who do not agree with us. James wants us to be transformed by faith so that we will be drawn closer to God. He wants us to become more Christ-like by growing in our willingness and ability to do what Christ would do if he were us.

Now, I know what you are thinking. Doesn't Paul say something different? Doesn't the Apostle say that our salvation is by faith and not works? Isn't James wrong?

Not really.

Paul, particularly in his letters to the Romans and Galatians, emphasizes justification by faith and not from works of the Law. He argues that no one can be justified by the works of the Law because all have sinned. Accordingly, the faith of Christ is essential for salvation.

The faith of Christ, though, is not merely intellectual assent. It is more than just agreement that certain things about God are true. As Jesus shows us, faith is a transformative trust in God that inevitably leads to a life of

ethical behavior. Paul calls this the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5).

James emphasizes that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). James is addressing a different context where socio-economic distinctions are disrupting the community as the wealthy exercise privileges not available to others and in some cases detrimental to others. James is trying to restore the egalitarian nature of the community by pointing out that how you behave matters. Genuine faith reveals itself through compassionate actions — particularly through care for the poor and vulnerable.

You can see, I think, that Paul and James are not saying different things. They are looking at distinct aspects of the same thing because they are addressing different problems. Paul is focusing on how we enter a right relationship with God, which is by faith, while James is focusing on the evidence of that relationship, which is seen in works.

They both agree that authentic faith leads to a transformed life. That is, as your faith grows, you become more compassionate, not less.

You can see how this works in the ministry of our patron saint, Philip.

In Acts 8, we are told that Philip was preaching the gospel in Samaria. He performed great signs — driving out impure spirits in the name of Jesus, healing the paralyzed and lame. Eventually, Philip came to a people who were already enamored with a man who performed signs of a different kind and from a different source.

The man's name is Simon. He claimed to be a great man because of the magic that he was able to perform. The people were amazed and praised him as having the power of God.

When Philip came, though, the people believed his preaching about Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God and were baptized. He performed great miracles among them as signs of God's presence.

Simon believed too and, after having been baptized, followed Philip.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. Philip had baptized the people in the name of Jesus. Peter and John laid hands on them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money if they might give him the power to give the Holy Spirit to people by laying hands on them. Peter admonished Simon for thinking that he could buy the gift of God with money. He told Simon that Simon did not have the heart to do what he wanted to do. Simon's heart was not right before God. Peter told Simon to repent and pray to God that the wicked intent of his heart may be forgiven.

Simon asked Peter to pray for him so that he might be spared the consequences of his wickedness (Acts 8:9-14).

Simon wanted the power of the Kingdom of God without becoming the kind of person who would be fit for the kingdom. He was willing to use the language of faith, but not because he had a vision for a life of faith. He sought to acquire what he wanted through a transaction because he was not willing to undergo a transformation. He thought he could buy the status that the apostles enjoyed. Peter points out that this is not how it works, but Simon cannot see it. He is deceiving himself. Simon asks Peter to pray that he will not suffer the consequences of his own wicked intent. Simon fails to understand that what does or does not happen to him, or what he could or could not do, depends on what kind of person he became.

Compare Simon's delusion to the clarity of the Ethiopian eunuch in the story of his encounter with Philip that is so familiar to us.

After baptizing Simon, Philip comes across the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is a man of significant status in charge of the treasure of the queen. Like Simon, he is trying to learn about God.

You remember the story. The eunuch asks Philip to help him understand a passage that he is reading from Isaiah and Philip takes the opportunity to tell the eunuch the good news about Jesus. The eunuch then sees some water and asks to be baptized. Philip baptizes him. When they come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord took Philip away and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:36-39)

Do you see the difference between the two stories?

The eunuch learns about God and then gives himself to God ... not for his sake but for God's sake. He is not trying to use God to get something else that he wants.

It is like falling in love with music. We want to learn to play a musical instrument because we love music. We give ourselves to it. We play with joy and curiosity. We do not worry about how good we are. We avoid comparing ourselves with others or judging other's gifts as better than ours. The process itself is fulfilling. We are doing it because we love music, not because we want external rewards or outcomes for being good at making the music.

James says, "Become doers of the word and not simply hearers. That would be to deceive yourselves."

James uses the ancient metaphor of the mirror to make his point.

According to legend, some rabbis carried mirrors hidden in their cloaks. The mirrors served as a reminder of the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. The idea was that by looking into the mirror, the rabbis could see themselves as others might see them, prompting them to act with empathy and understanding towards others.

James is saying that when we look into the mirror and see a face that reminds us of Simon, we tend to forget what we have seen.

By contrast, when we look into the mirror and see a face that reminds us of the eunuch, we feel a sense of joy that we remember as a blessing.

I am thinking that when Sahith Theegala looked into the mirror this morning, he saw something that reminded him of the eunuch, in which case, he will be ready to play today!