

# Operating instructions

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Buddy Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service, August 30, 2009: The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on James 1:17-27 and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.*

The first book of Anne Lamott's that I ever read is called *Operating Instructions*, a diary of the first year of her son Sam's life. It is an irreverent, hilarious collection of all the things that we question about life, particularly but not uniquely related to childrearing. Anne's inimitable magic is that she voices what most of us are too sophisticated (or is it too fearful?) to ever say aloud. Her premise is that we come, all of us, to life without operating instructions. And, of course, she is right. In my experience even when we have them, I find them less than helpful, particularly ones that come with the latest gadget I have purchased. I am always relieved that the accompanying set of instructions is thick because it is in five languages, only to be crushed again when I discover that the English set is, for me, as utterly indecipherable as the one in Japanese.

The lesson from James that we heard a moment ago is in some sense a short collection of operating instructions for life, for the life of those who would follow Jesus. The entire book of James is complicated and difficult to pin down. Who wrote it—was it James the Just, James the Lesser, James the Greater? Who knows? The quality of its message, its very theology, is also questioned and has been debated for centuries. Martin Luther particularly took exception to it, objecting to its emphasis on the importance of “doing” right, of right living as the path to salvation. Luther, seeing salvation as the act of grace, not works, considered this epistle an extremely Catholic document, a description not intended as praise.

Regardless, James offers some wise life instructions: “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; be doers of the word not just hearers; be careful what you say particularly about

others; don't deceive your hearts but be honest about who it is you see in the mirror and then remember who you really are; take care of the less fortunate around you.” Though it is not an exhaustive list, a complete set of instructions, it surely gives some strong hints about how our lives are to be lived.

It is an old question, this desire to know what the right behavior is. In the gospel today we encounter Jesus again confronted for his bad behavior and that of his disciples: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” Apparently in their hunger or enthusiasm or flagrant disregard for custom, some of them failed to keep kosher in their eating behavior. Refusing even to go there, as we would say, Jesus enigmatically but profoundly responded that it is from the human heart, not some outside action, that evil comes. Like the prophets before him, Jesus always said that it was the circumcision of the heart that he cared about; that is to say, a changed heart is always more important than an external action, no matter how pious.

It is not surprising that Jesus met opposition. Part of the appeal of the liturgical tradition is that it literally tells us what to do and how to act. Jesus certainly respected such ritual, regularly availing himself of the teaching and liturgy of the temple. But in the living of his life, he always placed the importance of love ahead of any other rule. Both in the letter of James and in all the narratives of Jesus' life, through all the words there is an ineluctable sense that above all Jesus' purpose, whether he or they would have said it this way, was to show us how to live, to give us operating instructions for our lives. In our version of Christendom, the progressive

voice of Christianity we call ourselves, we, and particularly preachers in our tradition, are often reticent about proclaiming what such instructions might be for fear that we will seem preachy or condemning, or that speaking about such things serves to expose our own shortcomings (which of course they do).

But it occurs to me that unless we as a lingering, praying community agree that there are some “rules,” not rules that exist simply to exist or to exclude, but rather to show us ways to conform to the life we say we wish to emulate, then we truly don’t have much chance of remaining relevant. If all we say is, “you don’t have to follow that rule anymore because we now know better,” without saying how we are supposed to act, can there be any surprise that our critics say we don’t stand for anything? In following Christ, it is not true that anything goes; there are rules, rules of love, and they are tough and demanding rules. If we are serious about our lives being transformed in the likeness of Christ, then we need as a community to boldly speak of “the way,” the way of holiness.

So in the rest of my sermon this morning, I am going to take a stab at a set of operating instructions. These are the words of one priest in one sermon; and though I shall use the pronoun “you,” in every case I am talking to myself first. The list is neither exhaustive nor indemnified; so follow it at your own risk, without blaming St. Bartholomew’s:

- ❖ Love matters more than anything in the world; and while love is never uncomplicated, it is usually simpler than we admit. In most cases, we know which is the more loving path.
- ❖ Tradition that is rooted in and promotes love is worth giving our lives to. Tradition that is mean or exclusive needs to be appreciated for the dinosaur it is, not followed because it is the way we have always done it.

- ❖ Generosity is an act of love, even when there is an internal struggle about being generous. The impulse to give in response to love should never be resisted; it is almost never regretted even when it complicates things down the road, as it may. By giving, we may have less, but beyond a doubt that will be a case of less being more.
- ❖ When there is conflict between an act of love and a feeling of love, always go with the act. If the feeling comes, that is great. If it doesn’t, you still acted lovingly.
- ❖ Beware of phrases like “business is business” and “that’s just politics,” for both tend to justify actions that would never pass the love test. If trying to make that square with “real life” is difficult for you, even on occasion absolutely impossible, consider yourself on the spiritual journey and in good company. Getting it right every time does not happen for any of us.
- ❖ Openness to others may indeed mean that on occasion we get used or taken advantage of by someone; whatever that costs us amounts to a lot less than the price of remaining on our guard every second. Jesus said a hard, safe heart is a dead heart.
- ❖ Know what your story is and give your life to it. If the Christian story opens the greatest window to God for you, live into it with all you have. Go to church a lot, maybe even every day. Don’t worry when the story seems muddled; just remember that it is yours and that God is with you in your story when it makes sense and when it doesn’t.

Yesterday as I was finishing this sermon, off and on, mostly on, I watched the televised service of Senator Kennedy’s funeral mass. I

thought about him in terms of what operating instructions he had received, how they had worked for him and how at times they had not worked well at all. Learning more about him since his death, I was struck particularly with the place of the church, the place of private and public devotion that seemed to have given shape and focus to his life. His detractors quickly and correctly say that he failed to live by that standard perfectly or even very well, often making some bad personal decisions. What his most ardent critics fail to admit is that the same, of course, must be said for the rest of us.

But beyond just the fact of his religiosity, I found the entire event immensely interesting, from a sociological standpoint if nothing else, this huge public and very religious funeral in our largely secular society. I ponder what that says about our culture, about lingering faith expressed in and through an institution that is likely seen by many of the people crowded into those pews yesterday—and perchance by some of us—as increasingly anachronistic, perhaps sentimentally important but not of any real consequence in our lives.

In an unsuspecting way, this great public event is a compelling argument for the preservation of ritual in our lives, ritual as a

critical part of our operating instructions. We need it; it need not look like ours necessarily, though I can’t imagine why everyone would not want it to, but it must be present. It tells us how to say goodbye, how to celebrate the union of two people, how to bring our children symbolically into the grace of God, how to concretize our abstract desires to love those different from us, to do good for those less fortunate than we are, how to seek God in a particular way at altars like this one around the world. Without it, I fear that we shall languish, that we shall lose not the love and grace of God either now or beyond this life—that is not ours to lose—but that we shall miss moments of transcendence and hope, moments that tip the balance of our lives toward holiness, toward God.

Maybe in the end we learn that operating instructions emerge from the living of our lives, sometimes lived lovingly, sometimes not so much. Maybe we learn that they have been there all along in the presence and promise of hope poised throughout the journey to show us the way.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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