

“Working Faith”
Homecoming Sunday
September 8, 2024
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Scripture James 2:1-10, 14-17 (NRSVUE)

My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality. For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here in a good place, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it...What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

What a joy it is to be here, all together, on Homecoming Sunday. This is a special holiday for Seattle First Baptist Church. It is not just a “rally Sunday” when we kick off the new school year and all the programs begin again. In this church, we take seriously the idea of “home” and “belonging,” and particularly on this day, we love to say “welcome home.”

Now, we know that no home is perfect. And we are far from perfect, because we are human! But we do our best to love and care for each other, to love and care for our neighbors, to steward this planet with compassion, because we understand those actions to be practically how we follow the Way of Jesus in this world.

We recently have put our faith in action by renovating the chancel area so that it is more accessible to all people. Where folks in wheelchairs or with walkers could once not climb the stairs to sing in the choir or to speak from the pulpit, now there is a ramp. And for folks who were nervous to climb the front chancel steps without a railing, there is only one step up. We continue to make improvements to our sound system so that all can have the opportunity to hear the words and music shared from this space. We continue to work on the lighting in the sanctuary so that we would be able to see one another and read the bulletin and hymnal.

These are physical improvements that we work on in our church as signs of how we follow the Way of Jesus, a way that is accessible and compassionate to all. But as we rejoice in the tangible renovations that have been made, we also must wonder, what about our faith and our congregational wellbeing needs work? What renovations would be helpful to improve the efficacy of our faith? And what does that work mean to us, on this Homecoming Sunday?

The letter of James speaks well to us today. Though the Bible is not actually a very theologically consistent work, with words recorded by many people from many different places and times with many different viewpoints and ideas, James seems to openly challenge the development of Christian theology that took hold particularly in the Protestant Reformation: the idea of salvation by faith alone: *sola fide*. The well-known and deeply problematic Reformer Martin Luther famously did not like the letter of James because it concerned the “work” of faith and one of the things the Reformers who were splitting from the Catholic Church were taking issue with was the idea of “works righteousness,” the concept that you could prove your piety or earn your salvation by your actions.

But the letter of James is more complex than that: the author is not making a case for why faith doesn’t matter and actions (works) only matter; or for why works are more important than faith. The author of James writes to argue something that may seem rather obvious, but is actually truly profound: a life of faith results in behaviors of doing good works.

One commentator on the “Theology of Work” blog writes,

“James takes it for granted that believing in Christ (trusting in God) will move you to feel compassion for—and act to help—someone in need...James does not imagine that work is at odds with faith. There can be no “justification by works” because there can be no good works unless there is already faith (trust) in God. James doesn’t mean that faith can exist without works yet be insufficient for salvation. He means that any “faith” that doesn’t lead to works is dead; in other words, it is no faith at all... James doesn’t command Christians to work for the benefit of others in need *instead of* placing faith in Christ, or even *in addition to* placing faith in Christ. He expects that Christians will work for the benefit of others in need *as a result of* placing faith in Christ.”¹

This is profound for us as Christians in the USA today because it is all too easy to forget that our behaviors in this world are expressions of our beliefs. It is so easy to fall into the trap of working our way into being “good enough” or “righteous enough” or “social justice minded enough.” There’s always more to do, ways to improve ourselves, new language that we need to know to fit in. And that trap is so dangerous—for ourselves, for others, and for the causes that we strive to be in solidarity with. We must be careful not to give in to intoxicating perfectionism, being unwilling to try an action or to take a stand in fear of not doing it right. It is dangerous to abhor the messiness of trying with generous intentions because we are afraid of not being good enough.

¹<https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/general-epistles/james-faith-works/faith-and-works-james-214-26/>

And on the other side of the scale, there is temptation from the strange brand of American individualist Christianity to display a kind of milquetoast piety, one that has no gravitas or social purpose, one that lacks an impulse to take action because one is used to the comfort it provides. In the early 2010s, some theologians called this “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a faith that seeks primarily to feel happy and morally superior without having need of God unless there’s a crisis, thoroughly convinced that they have a spot reserved in heaven because that’s what a happy and morally superior person deserves.

Really, the truth of the interplay of faith and works is somewhere in the messy, inconsistent, learning and growing middle.

This quote from James Baldwin’s “the Fire Next Time” is often apt, and applies here: “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.”

My question for us today is not what works are you doing with your faith, but is your faith working? And is our faith, as a body of Christ, working?

Is my, and your, and our collective faith, doing what Baldwin hopes, to make us “larger, freer, and more loving”? Is our faith under renovation as it removes barriers, makes ways smoother, brings us literally closer to one another and to The Holy?

Using the language of his time, 19th century preacher Charles H. Spurgeon, said,

“The best and the wisest thing in the world is to work as if it all depended upon you, and then trust in God, knowing that it all depends upon him. He will not fail us, but we are not therefore to fold our arms and sit still. He will not forsake us; we are not, therefore, to go upstairs to bed and expect that our daily bread will drop into our mouths.... Oh no, no, no, no, God does not pander to our laziness, and any man who expects to get on in this world with anything that is good, without work, is a fool. Throw your whole soul into the service of God, and then you will get God’s blessing if you are resting upon him.”

When I think about people whose faith works, who, in Spurgeon’s words, “threw their whole souls into the service of God,” our common “saints” come to mind: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Walter Rauschenbusch. Each of these people’s faith made theological and practical sense to them, following an internal logic of love that led them to pursue tangible justice and peace. Their experiences of faith were intimate dispositions of their hearts, and yet they practiced faith like it was a verb—always an action.

As a teenager, I was gifted Corrie ten Boom’s autobiography, *The Hiding Place*. I was looking for ways of understanding if being a follower of Jesus the Christ had any meaning for me, and if me being a Christian had any meaning for the world. Reading the account of Corrie’s life was deeply meaningful. This Christian woman participated in the Dutch resistance to Nazi forces by hiding Jewish people in her home and smuggling resources that resulted in over 800 Jewish people surviving the war. And she did it because she knew it was right, because she knew God’s

love and care was for all people, and because she was committed to making a difference in a small way—that actually had huge implications. And she was so humble—not parading her righteousness after the war, but convinced to write the account by people who stumbled upon her story and said, “you need to share this.” One phrase resonates with me always: “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

To me, this is the essence of faith: live like God is real. The future is unknown, but we know the Sacred One who walks and talks and lives and loves alongside us. Thus, we can put our faith into action knowing that the salvation of the world does not rest solely on us, but that we are a part of an ecosystem of peacemakers, a neural network of neighbors, through which God works.

So, beloved church, is our faith working? Is it “working” as in operating well or successfully? Is it making us more loving, more generous, more compassionate, more communal, more just?

Are we working on our faith? Are we asking questions, listening closely to wise ones we trust, seeking out opportunities to learn, considering different opinions, holding space to receive God’s call for us?

Is our faith working, as in, does it have its hands dirty, is it sweating, is it risking curiosity? Is our faith cozy and comfortable and ultimately forgettable, or does it challenge us to go out of our way to help someone else, to speak against injustice, to carry another’s heavy burden, to share our lives vulnerably, with the knowledge that we also may be bolstered by others?

The illustration the author of the epistle uses to prompt these wonderings resonates across time and space and community context: when someone who is well dressed and eloquent comes into our space, how do we treat them? And when someone who is living on the margins comes in, with worn clothes and in need of a bath, how do we treat them? If our answers to those questions are different at the core, if dignity founded in love is proffered to one and not the other, then our faith is not working.

New Testament Scholar Sandra Hack Polaski writes in one commentary,

“The figure James uses in illustration of this point is, again, just as vivid, just as easy to imagine, in a contemporary context as in a first-century one. It may first be tempting to let ourselves off the hook by presuming that the believer who sends a needy person away with pious platitudes must be a hypocrite who means nothing that he says. But James’s portraits are more incisively drawn than this, and there is no evidence to support the idea that “Go in peace” (a phrase Jesus spoke frequently to those he healed) is intended here as a meaningless platitude. No: James intends that we see ourselves here. Whenever we encounter a man or woman in need...and pledge to add them to our prayer list, assuring them that God is powerful and will surely fulfill their needs, but *we do not do what is in our power to meet their physical needs* — we have failed. Our words about the sufficiency of divine power may, in fact, be true. But our faith, if it is expressed only by the words we speak, is a cold and worthless corpse.”²

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-james-21-10-11-13-14-17>

Dear friends, we are all too familiar with words that are cold and worthless—just this week we saw the social media posts and tweets and interviews where many politicians quipped that they were sending “thoughts and prayers” to all those impacted by the 45th school shooting this year at Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia. But...that was the 45th school shooting this year—what do thoughts and prayers mean when they are not followed up by actions to make sure that the number of school shootings each year never even reaches 1?

Please don’t get me wrong: thoughts surrounding loved ones and prayers for neighbors are not meaningless, and sometimes, it is true that those are all we have. But when we *do* have other resources at our disposal, when we can take action that gives feet to those thoughts and motion to those prayers, a faithful action is just that...to act.

Beloved church, the works of faith are many. We probably know them when we see them: sharing resources with those in need, distributing aid after natural disasters, praying with the sick, visiting those in prison, volunteering with peacemaking agencies across the globe. Those are important actions that people do because of their faith, but all of us are not called to these activities.

But there are many works of faith that are much more accessible, and that often go unnoticed or even taken for granted. Do we see the works of faith that are preparing the communion bread, lighting the candles each Sunday, helping an elder park their car, welcoming someone new to your table at a potluck, turning on the church building lights in the morning, changing the toilet paper rolls, sharing a comforting hug when someone is in mourning, paying respects at the columbarium, offering music that speaks to souls in a way that the spoken word cannot, rejoicing with someone getting their first (or 50th) AA chip, celebrating loving partners’ weddings after decades of waiting for legal recognition. These works of faith are living what we believe. These works of faith are illustrations of how we belong to one another and create “home” right here and right now.

University of Glasgow professor Kelsie Rodenbiker writes about our scripture passage today:

“James has explained what faithful action entails. Faithful living, in this sense, is a two-sided coin: inaction is also faithlessness. Belief without works is not faith; conviction without action is emptiness. The author presents a challenge: show me your faith without action—I dare you—and I will provide confirmation of my faith through action (2:18). The rhetoric is clear: this separation is impossible, because faith works.”³

Beloved church, on this day of Homecoming as we welcome each other into the beautiful, imperfect, invitational, messy, learning and growing place that is this community, let each of us consider our faith with curiosity. Let each of us assess how we live our values, how we embody the Way of Jesus that we follow—not to criticize ourselves or one another for what we do not or cannot do, out of an unhealthy desire for perfection, but to be accountable to God and to one another. As we call this place home, let us make it a home—a place of belonging for all who seek

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-2/commentary-on-james-21-10-11-13-14-17-6>

what it means to follow the Way of Jesus, a place where honesty and compassion and grace characterize our relationships, a place where it is ok to learn and grow and change, a place where each of us is free to be ourselves and supported as we tune our hearts to receive the calling of the Holy.

Welcome home, dear children of God. Take off your shoes, stay a while, this is holy ground, and your presence makes it so.

May it be so. Amen.