

Faith and Works

As you know, I almost always preach, if not exclusively, then primarily, from the gospel lesson each week.

That's because the message of the gospel is so terribly hard to wrap our hearts and minds around.

It requires such a change in how we see the world and each other.

So that, if we want to take our best shot at getting what Jesus is giving, we probably ought to focus on the words of Jesus himself.

But today we'll focus on the letter from James, which happily, is the next best thing to the gospel.

Because James is the brother of Jesus.

He's the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Probably he knows the mind of Jesus best.

And, like Jesus, James doesn't mind sticking his finger in someone's eye, if that finger will help that someone come to see the good news.

Isn't that what James is up to today?

I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition and so this letter was perfectly fine with me.

But for those who grew up in the Protestant tradition, this letter is often seen as verging on heresy.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant reformation, was an Augustinian priest in the Roman Catholic Church when he had had enough of the graft and corruption within the institutional church.

He was sick to death of clergy acting as shakedown artists against the faithful by insisting that certain acts (usually paying money!) were "needed" for salvation.

Luther himself was a guilt stricken, fearful and extremely pessimistic individual.

He thought he could never measure up to God's expectations, and therefore would most likely be damned.

Until he hit on the revelation in Paul's letters.

That we are saved solely by grace.

That the "works" which a corrupt church demanded were simply that, demands of a corrupt church, not of God.

But like most things with us humans, when God asks us for an inch we give it a mile.

So Luther looked at the admonition James gives in his letter today, that faith without works is dead, and happily tosses out the baby with the bathwater.

Luther argues that this letter has no place in the New Testament.

Which is one of the many reasons I'm happy to be an Anglican.

At our best, we in the Anglican tradition provide a middle way between Rome and the Protestant reformers.

We hope to adopt the best in each tradition as we seek to follow and worship God.

And in our tradition, the letter of James is welcome.

It's insistence that we look out for the least, the lost and the left behind is at the heart of not only the teachings of Jesus – but of the law of the Jewish people as well.

Caring for the immigrant, the stranger, the rejected and neglected, is as old as the Bible itself.

Some say the command to look after the widow and orphan is primarily because in those days we didn't have social service agencies.

And while that may be true to a point, it merely opens the door a bit to the wisdom behind this command.

In order to fully enter into this wisdom, we need to look deeper.

For what is it that Jesus brings, but the kingdom of God?

And what is the kingdom of God, but the creation of the beloved community?

And what is the beloved community, but all of us caring for one another?

Tending to each other's needs?

And putting the other gal's needs ahead of my wants.

It's the reason that Jesus leaves us with the great command: that we love one another.

That command swallows up every other law.

As St. Augustine famously says, "love, and do what you will."

And yet, as the writer remarks:

"Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.

Love in dreams always seeks instant attention, showing off in front of a crowd.

A man might even sacrifice his life, if the ordeal is over quickly, so long as everyone is captivated and applauding, like watching a play on stage.

But active love is hard, often lonely work, requiring rigorous, patient, dedication..." Dostoyevsky, paraphrased.

Do we practice "active love" here at St Elizabeth's?

If you drive by any day of the week, you're bound to see houseless folks sitting or laying down in front of the glass doors of the church.

And I know this drives some folks nuts!

Others look at that scene and say, "yes, this is exactly what churches are supposed to do."

The reason that it's so important for the outwardly needy to be here is the witness they provide.

The witness to those of us who, like me, outwardly seem just fine.

But scratch the surface, and there's often a shabbiness, a need, more vast than that of the houseless.

Whether it's the 80-year-old respected retiree — who's addicted to Internet porn.

Or a young mother who can't, or won't, forgive a sibling.

Or a young man consumed with dominating his girlfriend.

Or the middle-aged person so wrapped up with material success that he's lost touch not only with those who love him, but with his own soul too.

All of us are in need of understanding.

Of compassion.

Of the willingness to hear and be heard.

To consider and commiserate.

As we all of us work through the very things that keep us separated from ourselves — and from God.

But recognizing that need sometimes requires a poke in the eye!

Which is what Jesus does with the parables.

Which is what James is doing today, with his letter.

Which is what we are also called to do from time to time in our ministries.

Which is why, last week, your Rector mentioned during a news interview that those who aren't willing to take the covid vaccine

ought to seriously consider whether it's fair for them to go to the hospital — when (not if) they become infected.

Which set off quite a kerfuffle among some folks.

Many of whom argue that God gave us freedom, so to coerce vaccinations is an affront to that God-given freedom.

Except, the God of Jesus, the God of the Israelites, gives us no such thing.

The God we worship, as followers of Jesus, is a God who calls us to create the beloved community.

The God we worship calls us out of ourselves — so that we might serve one another.

Which is why “we’re all free to do whatever we like, no matter the consequences to everyone else” is the precise opposite of the great commandment.

Simply put, “me first” isn't Christianity.

It's western capitalism.

Which depends on highly individualized people looking out for number one so that a consumer society can grow ever bigger — fulfilling individual wants.

But Christ laid down his life for all of us!

And we are commanded to do the same for each other.

As the mystic says:

“He who saves but one life, saves the whole world.”

We are in the midst of a pandemic of the unvaccinated.

And while a very tiny minority of that group may have legitimate medical reasons to refrain from the vaccine, the vast majority of the 30–40%, largely 20 to 50 year olds, who are not yet vaccinated, don't.

Whether the objection is based on distrust of government or fear of microchips or becoming magnetized or a magical belief that one's faith will save one from the virus — the risk to family, friends and strangers outweighs those concerns, beliefs, arguments and fears.

In my humble opinion.

Hundreds of millions have been vaccinated, nearly all without major complications.

Meanwhile, our medical professionals are beyond exhausted.

Oxygen supplies are imperiled.

Hospital beds are full.

And deaths from the virus are escalating.

Faith without works is dead.

If you're unvaccinated, please — take the poke.

It may save not only your life, but the life of the whole world too.

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