

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands
Sunday, February 2, 2020 - Communion
Rev. Cheryl Raine

The First Reading is Ephesians 2:1-10

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and ***we were by nature children of wrath***, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—***by grace you have been saved***— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸***For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—*** ⁹***not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*** ¹⁰***For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.***

The Second Reading is James 2:14-26

¹⁴***What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?*** Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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? ¹⁷***So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.***

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰***Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?*** ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴***You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.***

²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶***For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.***

The Message is entitled *Nature of Faith*

The passage I just read is the theological climax of James’ plea for a genuine faith. It is also the reason why Martin Luther raised objections about the inclusion of James in our biblical canon. Luther’s sticking point with James was the theological tension he saw between James and the chief New Testament books over the matter of justification of faith. Well, today we get to tackle this tension, but first let me remind you what Martin Luther thought of this Epistle of Straw, for he wrote, “James mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all of Scripture.”

So, listen to these seemingly contradictory verses from James and Paul. James says, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,” while Paul said, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—

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⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast” [Ephesians 2:8-9]. Paul also said, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works” [Romans 3:28]. Do you see why Luther has issues with James?

Yet, we must always remember that context is important when we interpret Scripture. We have to ask ourselves what concern each of these pastors were addressing. Were they addressing the same issue? The simple answer is no.

Paul was in the thick of Jewish religious culture and the Pharisee’s stress on the law or works of the law as a way to salvation. You might remember the fledging church’s debate found in Acts chapter 15, as the Jerusalem Council met over the issue of circumcision. Did Gentile believers have to be circumcised? Did they have to become Jewish before they could become full-fledged believers in Christ? During the debate some said this, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” According to those who said this, salvation was conditional upon the works of the law. That is, to be saved, works of law were necessary.

Paul was addressing this fallacy. Paul emphatically said it is not the works of the law that save us, for we all fall short of the glory of God, no matter how good we are at the works of the law. “While we were still sinners Christ died for us... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works,” said Paul. The reformation of the 16th century solidified this understanding naming three “solas”— sola grace, sola faith, sola scripture - grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone. Yet, I should make it clear that the reformers also said, “Justification is by faith alone, but not faith that is alone.” Did you hear that? “But not faith that is alone.”

This leads us to James. James context was different than Paul’s. James is not in the thick of Jewish religious culture, rather he is writing to various churches influenced by Greek culture, a culture which emphasized knowing and knowledge. Although, Gnosticism (which comes from the Greek word “gnosis” meaning “knowledge”) wasn’t fully developed at the time when James was writing, it was still a potent influence. What James was seeing within the church were individuals who had turned faith into nothing more than “knowing” or “knowledge” about God. This knowledge lead to a verbal commitment to certain doctrines, but nothing more.

That is why James challenged the church saying, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat you fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?” James would conclude that this person’s faith is not genuine. It is just empty words. For James our faith rooted in the perfect law of love found in the Hebrew Scriptures and espoused by Jesus - love God and love neighbor – is to be visible. The loving thing to do would be to find a way to provide for the needs of this brother or sister, not just give them empty words.

James is asking us whether or not our theology possesses us and makes itself manifest in us, for genuine faith results in a dynamic and active response to God’s grace. That is, something far more than just empty words.

As Douglas Moo writes, “James is not arguing that a Christian must add works to faith; [rather] James insists that true saving faith will work.” Or as the reformers said, “Not faith that is alone” or devoid of outward signs. The nature of faith, of genuine faith according to James, is that it naturally produces works. Genuine faith is not merely a noun, something we know or have. It is

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something we live. Therefore, faith is a verb. It will look different in each person's life, but ultimately it will be visible.

As I shared in my opening sermon, Saint Francis would have approved of James, for Francis loved God above all and wanted to imitate Jesus in very practical ways. Action and lifestyle mattered much more to him than mentally believing dogmatic or moral positions to be true or false. Francis directly said to the first friars, "You only know as much as you *do!*" The genuineness of our faith is demonstrated through our actions.

As we read Paul more closely, we actually see that he agrees with James and Francis, for he too understands that faith is a verb. Listen again to Ephesians, for Paul says, "We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." The nature of our faith, says Paul as well as James is that good works is to be our way of life!

Now James uses two epic examples of visible works to get his point across. First, through obedience to God's word, Abraham does the unthinkable and prepares to offer his son as a sacrifice, which is certainly a sermon or two all by itself. And then James shares of Rahab, the polar opposite personality of an Abraham in any society, who harbors spies at great personal risk to herself. Yet, both Abraham and Rahab possessed a faith that was made manifest in their works. There were visible signs of what they believed.

Yet, is faith always epic, then and now? You may associate epic stories of faith today with missionaries who leave everything behind to venture into a foreign land to share the good news or someone who sold his or her possessions, while giving all the proceeds to assist the poor. Epic stories of faith are present in the bible as well as today, yet not all stories of faith are epic. Lived faith looks different in each of us because God created each one of us uniquely. God does not call us to live our faith like someone else, epic or not. God calls us to be ourselves and to live our faith authentically day in and day out.

Yet, what does lived faith look like in us? Maybe your love of neighbor, manifests itself by your willingness to initiate a welcoming party for a new neighbor, even though it is hard for you because God wired you as an introvert. Maybe your lived faith gives you the courage to accept a leadership role that you know will stretch your talents and your time. Maybe your lived faith gives you the courage to engage a coworker that is rightly upset with you in order for you to apologize and mend fences. Maybe your lived faith inspires you to give financially to a cause that touched your heart, even though you could really use the money. Maybe your lived faith will give you the courage to initiate a conversation with a friend of yours who is heading down a questionable path.

Max Lucado reminds us that, "You and I have the privilege to do for others what God does for us." So, how do we show people that we love them as God loves us? Lucado suggests that we show up, listen up and speak up in the midst of other people's lives.

On Wednesday mornings, I show up and listen up to first graders as most of you know. Although, these first graders have no idea of the faith I claim, they know that I will show up and listen up on Wednesday mornings. I'm involved in our community, because I believe that my lived faith calls me to be engaged in our community in which I serve as pastor. I don't know how God will use my time each week with the kiddos, but I do know that these first graders know that there are adults in their lives who care enough to show up and listen up.

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Sometimes we have to care enough to speak up though. Lucado shares this story, "Nathaniel Hawthorne came home heartbroken. He'd been fired from his job. His wife, rather than responding with anxiety, surprised him with joy. "Now you can write your book!"

He wasn't so positive. "And what shall we live on while I'm writing it?"

To his amazement she opened a drawer and revealed a wad of currency she'd saved out of her housekeeping budget. "I always knew you were a man of genius," she told him. "I always knew you would write a master piece."

She believed in her husband. And because she did, he wrote. And because he wrote, every library in America has a copy of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

James and Paul complement one another, it's just that we need to remember that they were responding to different situations. Douglas Moo summarizes succinctly what we learned today: "When people try to earn faith or rely on religious activities for salvation, then they need to hear Paul. On the other hand, when faith has turned into nothing more than a verbal commitment to certain doctrines, they need to hear James." Or as Martin Luther even said in his preface to Romans, "O it is a living, busy active thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is consistently doing them."

"No life of faith can be lived privately, there must be overflow into the lives of others," says Eugene Peterson. By God's grace let us show up, listen up and speak up in love. Let's do for others what God does for us by making our faith visible! That, my friends, is the nature of our faith. Amen.