

Bringing Faith to Life

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Holy Communion
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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:8-26; Mark 7:24-30

“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” -- James 2:17

It's a well-known fact to students of church history that Martin Luther didn't think much of the book of James, from which this morning's text is taken. Luther thought that the heart of the gospel was faith – that is, trust – in Jesus Christ as God's Son and Messiah, and that this faith alone justified sinners like us.

For Luther, works counted for nothing as far as salvation is concerned, so when the great reformer read in the book of James that “[J]ust as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (2:26), he felt he'd encountered a kind of throw-back to an earlier stage of pre-Christian religion, when people believed they could earn their salvation through works; a kind of religion that we commonly refer to as works-righteousness. Luther saw works-righteousness at work in the lives of Jesus' opponents in the gospels – those lawyers and scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees desperately tithing mint and cumin – and Luther also believed he saw works-righteousness dominating the lives of Medieval Catholic Christians, of whom he was one – Christians desperately trying to make it into heaven by paying for memorial masses or buying indulgences to reduce their time in purgatory or fasting on holy days of obligation or any number of other pious practices that had become the fabric of Medieval European Christianity.

Luther himself, as an Augustinian monk and priest, had been among the most desperate of those desperate Christians, and it was only when he found himself in despair over his inability to keep all the duties and obligations a good Christian of the late Middle Ages was supposed to keep that he realized that the church, his church, the Catholic Church, had taken several wrong turns and was in desperate need not only of salvation, but more immediately of reform, and that's the word we associate with Martin Luther to this day – the man who launched the Protestant Reformation.

You and I are Protestants today because of Luther's rejection of works-righteousness five hundred years ago, and one of the distinguishing marks of Protestant theology is our rejection of any suggestion that we are saved by what we do. It is God who saves us through God's own gracious act of love, and nothing we can do merits that salvation.

Well, okay, I'm a Protestant – I know some of you wonder about that sometimes, so let me assert it for you once again – I'm a Protestant Christian, and I share Luther's rejection of works-righteousness. But where I part with Luther and many other of my fellow Christians – Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox alike – is my belief that belief itself is as much a form of works-righteousness as any other work, and is therefore not to be raised to the status of a *sine qua non* as far as salvation is concerned.

Belief in the sense of getting yourself to think certain thoughts about Jesus or God or the Bible or anything else is a work – it's a work of your mind, a mental work, but a work all the same – and in my reading of the Bible, in my study of church history, and in

my half-century of living among Protestant Christians, I've come to the conclusion that belief-righteousness is simply another form of works-righteousness – a mental form – and is just as dangerous. In fact, it may be more dangerous than works-righteousness because belief-righteousness allows people to call themselves good Christians who think certain things about Jesus and God, if you ask them, but who live lives that bear only the slightest resemblance to the life Jesus lived and commanded his followers to live.

Jews like to say that you are what you do, and Jesus, being a first-century Palestinian Jew, made it abundantly clear that what you think, say, or even do about him isn't enough. Here's what he had to say about that in the Gospel of Matthew. You may want to fasten your seat belts: “Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.” (Matthew 7:21-23)

How's that for some shocking news from Jesus? All of those Christians for all of those centuries – and there are still millions and millions of them today – who insist that Jesus is the only way to God are in for a real surprise come Judgment Day if this passage from Matthew's Gospel is to be believed. What you think, say, or even do in Jesus' name is less important, ultimately, according to Jesus, than doing God's will – not Jesus' will, but God's will – and I've said many times before and I'll say it again, that the single greatest mistake the followers of Jesus ever made – greater than allowing Paul to define what we call Christianity, greater than allowing Constantine to co-opt Christianity for political purposes in the fourth century, greater even than allowing the German church to be taken captive by the Nazis – greater than all of these mistakes in my opinion was allowing the religion *of* Jesus to become the religion *about* Jesus. When that happened among Jesus' followers, Jesus' radical message of God's kingdom went right out the window, and it was replaced with theological thought-spinning and hair-splitting about the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, and we Christians have been spinning thoughts and splitting hairs about him ever since.

So while I share Luther's concern for works-righteousness, I don't share his distaste for the book of James, which Luther famously called an “epistle of straw.” I find the book of James to be a refreshing and necessary reminder that people who talk the pious talk but don't walk the sacrificial walk are little more than religious blow-hards and self-deceivers. Faith without works is dead, James reminds us, and my job as your pastor is to urge you, encourage you, exhort you, and even warn you not to become people desperately trying to live a dead faith.

Now, I have to say, in all candor, that for the most part, I'm not terribly worried about the faith of this congregation becoming a dead faith of thoughts or words only. Just a few weeks ago, our Vacation Bible School combined biblical teaching, Christian fellowship, care for creation, partnering in mission, and feeding the hungry in one of the most effective programs I've ever seen in a church of any size at any price.

We read from Leviticus, we sang from “Oliver!” we ate from paper bags, and we harvested over fifty pounds of fresh cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, squash, and basil from members' gardens and donated all of that good fresh locally-grown food to the Cleveland Food Bank. It was tremendous!

From the youngest to the oldest, from the most sprightly to the not-so-mobile, from the reader to the gardener, we had it all and we did it all in a way that allowed us to honor our deepest values, live out our Christian calling, and serve God's world in real and loving ways. And we had a blast doing it!

Bringing our faith to life in our Vacation Bible School wasn't drudgery or painful; it

was a joyous and delightful experience, and I would be remiss in not acknowledging the crucial role Kathy Lorentz played in making our VBS something truly extraordinary. Kathy's offering of seedlings to members of the congregation in exchange for a portion of the harvest for local hunger centers gave us the opportunity to bring the faith of our VBS to life, and I for one will always remember this past summer's VBS as a model of what Christian education can be and do. In fact, I'll be using our VBS as a case study later this fall in my Lay School course on The Teaching Ministry. VBS brought our faith to life and I know something like it can do the same for others.

For those of you who weren't part of our VBS, I'm sorry you missed it, but I can assure there will be plenty of other opportunities for you to bring your own faith to life, and I hope and pray you will take advantage of them. It is not for me to tell you how to do that; it is for you to discern, through thought and prayerful attention to the world around you how you will incarnate God's love for the world.

It may take the form of hammers and nails and dust and sweat as our faith did last summer at the Playground of Possibilities. It may take the form of pots and pans, as our faith does at Loaves and Fishes every fifth Friday of the month. It may take the form of a book and your reading glasses as our faith does in hospice and nursing homes and bedrooms all over our neighborhoods. It may take the form of letters to legislators or the paper, as our faith does trying to bring more justice and compassion to our unbalanced and aching world.

The possibilities to bring faith to life are endless because God's love is endless, and it is that love, finally, that brings our faith to life. GE may bring good things to life, as their old jingle used to say, but GE can't come close to what God's love has done and can do with the faith of each and every one of us here today, if we will only let it. None of us is too young or too old; none of us is too inform or too busy; none of us is too shy or too tired. God's Spirit, we believe, can make all things new, even us. And that Spirit is waiting for you to say yes, not in your head or with your lips, but with your day-in-and-day-out, week-after-week, month-after-month, year-after-year, utterly ordinary, quotidian existence – and so to bring your faith to life.