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## “A Faith That ‘Works’”

A few years ago, I received a birthday card from my sister-in-law and her husband. On the cover, it read:

“Two guys your age are at a bar after 10 o’clock on a Saturday night. One of the guys has six beers, the other has three beers and two shots of Jack. Who’s going to get hammered first?”

And when you open the card, inside it read:

“It’s a trick question. Guys your age are never out after 10 o’clock.”

Good card! And to be completely honest, this has nothing at all to do with the rest of my sermon; I just thought it was a funny card, and that maybe y’all could use a good laugh. Even at my expense. ‘Cause that’s my birthday gift to you y’all. You’re welcome.

Okay, a quick look at our Bible readings for this morning, reveals so much to choose from. Typically, I will try to preach on the Gospel; and, honestly, what preacher wouldn't jump at the chance to unpack that scene wherein Jesus calls the Syro-phoenician woman a dog? Who wouldn't want to sink their exegetical teeth into that text? However, and notwithstanding all of that, our reading from James is such a classic that I finally yielded to it's Sirens song. So, let's take a closer look at it.

Right from the get-go, that reading asks the question: "What good is faith without works? What good is doctrine without deeds? What good is Christian belief without Christian actions?" And, apparently, the answer is "Nothing at all." And James isn't just questioning the *usefulness* of a faith without works; he's actually questioning the *validity* of it. "Can [this sort of] faith save you?" he asks. And the implied answer is "No."

And in case there's any question about what James meant by the term "works," he offered us this concrete example:

"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?”

In other words, a kind *word* is not enough; an *act* of love is necessary. Because faith is not just something we *say*, but also something we *do*. Faith is not just something we *think*, but also something we *enact*. Faith is not just a function of the *mind*, but also a function of the *hands and feet*.

Personally, I used to believe that, once we came into possession of a faith in God, that the good works — the good deeds, the acts of charity — would naturally, and perhaps even automatically, follow. Well, apparently that wasn't true in James' day, and it's still not true today. In fact, I think it's safe to say that, from James' point of view, there's *not* this sequence of: first comes the faith, and next comes the works. No, for James, faith and works have to co-exist simultaneously. And like the words from that old song: “You can't have one without the other.”

One preacher said it like this:

Faith without works is like chocolate pie without the chocolate. Faith without works is

like vegetable soup without any veggies. Faith without works is like a turkey sandwich without turkey. It's just something else entirely. Faith without works just *doesn't* work.

Now, for a lot of years, a lot of very smart people have been debating whether or not James, in our reading this morning, was contradicting St. Paul, who, in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, wrote:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2: 8-9).

In other words, what Paul is declaring is that we are justified — that is, we are acquitted of any guilt and declared righteousness before God — by our faith alone, and not our works. But James seems to be declaring that faith alone is insufficient, if it is not also accompanied by good works. So, what gives?

Well, we who have been engaged in this debate may be the victims of faulty interpretation. Because, as I've recently learned, it

seems that James and Paul are putting forth positions that are actually quite complementary. Let me explain.

Apparently, and according to my sources, when Paul was using the term “works” — you know, we’re saved by faith and not works — when he used the term “works,” he was thinking about those sorts of things, that the Jewish people were supposed to do, to distinguish them from the non-Jewish nations around them; things like circumcision, and obeying the dietary laws, and observing the Sabbath.

So, when Paul says, as he does in Romans 3:28, that we are “justified by faith apart from works,” he means that it’s faith in Christ — or, a better translation might be “the faithfulness of Christ” — that brings salvation; Getting circumcised, or eschewing pork, or observing the Sabbath, doesn’t.

However, when James talks about “works,” he’s talking about acts of mercy; he’s talking about helping people in need; he’s talking about loving (*agapē*) people in tangible and concrete ways. And when James talks about how faith without works is dead, he is saying that anyone who claims a faith in God, but who isn’t performing acts of charity, is making a bogus claim.

And I think that Paul would absolutely agree with that; and that's why he writes, as he does in his letter to the Christians in Galatia,

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

The only thing that really counts is “faith working through love.” In other words, and in total agreement with James, Paul says that a saving faith is also a working faith.

In the final analysis, the teachings of James and Paul differ only in emphasis, and not in essence. Paul would emphasize that we are saved by faith, while James would emphasize that our works reveal our faith, and thus our salvation.

One of the shortcomings of the language we use, is that faith is a noun, but never a verb. But the verb we use to describe our faith is “believe,” as in “I believe in God.” And the problem with the word “believe” is that it has really strong mental connotations, and doesn't require that our hands or feet actually do anything. And

what we really need is a word that conveys the notion that faith is every bit a function of our hands and feet, as it is of our mind. And if you can figure out what that word might be, please let me know. But, and in the meantime, we'll have to make-do with what we have. For example:

Imagine someone making repairs to a homeless shelter, to prepare it for the coming winter. And when you ask him what he's doing, he replies: "Oh, I'm just believing."

Or, imagine a woman leaving a building, where she's been teaching English as a Second Language to a group of newly settled refugees. And when you ask her what she's been doing, she replies: "Oh, I've just been believing."

Or, imagine a highschool freshman, sitting alone in the cafeteria, and eating his reduced-price school lunch. But then a senior gets up from where he's been sitting with his friends, and goes over and befriends him. And when

you ask him what he's doing, he responds: "I'm just believing."

Yeah, we need a new word.

In the end, what our reading from the letter of James is insisting, is that *to believe in God, is to act in God*. And that a faith that is all talk and no action, is like a counterfeit \$20 bill; it looks good until you hold it up to the light. And James is suggesting that, from time to time, we hold our faith up to the light, and see if it's still an authentic faith; a faith that works.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we thank you for all your gifts: gifts given to us, and gifts given to others through us. We thank you especially for the gift of yourself, given freely to the world. Help us believe, not only in our heads, but also through our hands and feet, so that, one day, our faith is as much a verb, as it is a noun. And we ask this in the Name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.