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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, September 5, 2021
15th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 23/Proper 18/Year B

First Reading: Isaiah 35:4-7a

Second Reading: James 2:14-18

Gospel Reading: Mark 7:24-37

Sermon Title: “James – Brother of Jesus, Apostle of Christ – Part 2”

Theme

Faith does not pay mere lip service to God’s will. Instead, a living Christian faith expresses itself in acts of compassion and mercy for those in need.

Text – James 2:14-18

¹⁴What 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? ¹⁷So 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.

Theme

In Mark’s gospel, encounters with women usually signify turning points in Jesus’ ministry. Here, a conversation with a Syrophenician woman marks the beginning of his mission to the Gentiles.

Gospel: Mark 7:24-37

²⁴[Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs."

²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Introduction

The story of James, the author of the Letter of James, has fascinated me for a long time. Imagine being the half-brother to Jesus Christ!

Well, we have been presented with an opportunity to explore him, and his relationship with his big brother, and his ministry. For this and the next three weeks, the Epistle Readings are from the Letter of James. Now the editors of the lectionary have left a few passages out so I will cover them in the Daily Word, my online devotional. If you don't get the Daily Word, you may want to subscribe. And if you don't have access to the internet, I have print copies available at the Welcome Center. That way we will be able to cover the entire letter, which by the way, is only five chapters long.

As has been my pattern with sermon series, I will begin each week with some discovery into some issues about James, but then get into the actual passage from the Letter of James prescribed for the week.

The second issue we have to contend with is the authenticity of authorship.

Let's think about Jesus for a moment. We have no document that he is alleged to have written. However, we know that he could read because he read the scripture in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). But just because a first-century Jew could read, didn't mean he could write. There is one story in scripture where he wrote something in the dirt with his finger (John 8:3-9), but writing materials were expensive and in short supply, and if someone, even the apostle Paul wanted something written, he hired a scribe. With these thoughts, what do you think the chances are that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote the letter of James?

If you took the time to read the entire five-chapter letter in one sitting, I think you might come away feeling as though James is easier to read than Paul, for example. Would that make him more educated than Paul or Jesus? What is the likelihood of that? The commentaries I read said that "there is no reason why a Christian of the first generation who grew up in Galilee and wrote from Jerusalem should not have a style as good as that revealed in this composition." (183) So James could be the authentic writer.

The Letter of James is clearly more theocentric than Christocentric, meaning that it is more focused on the nature and activity of God than that of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Letter of James only uses the name of Jesus Christ twice (1:1; 2:1). Why is that? Could it be that James was faithful to his brother in deferring to God his Father as Jesus often did?

James makes no mention of Jesus' early life in his writings – that's a shame isn't it? But there is also no mention of his miracles, (which James may not have witnessed since he was NOT a disciple), no mention of his death which he probably did witness, or his resurrection, which we know he witnessed. James also never mentioned baptism, the Holy Spirit, or the Lord's Supper. Paul was the one who gave us the theology for those important experiences.

Yet the content of what he did write, his language and tone indicates that he got Jesus' message and was proceeding to teach it and pass it along, and given that his letter is likely older than the Gospels (probably around 49 CE or earlier) he may have been more focused on furthering the ministry of his big brother rather than telling of his history. We want to know those details, but James seems to have been focused on advancing the cause of Christ.

Finally, to the issue of authenticity of authorship, did James the brother of Jesus, write the Letter of James? It is debated, like almost everything in the Bible. Sometimes I think that Bible scholars are just highly educated people who have to come up with some new spin on ancient scripture to justify their Ph.D. And here let me add, the debate is pointless. Paul wrote, ² Timothy 3:16-17 “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” So whether James, the brother of Jesus, is the authentic author of the Letter of James or not, God through the Holy Spirit, has seen to it that it made the canon of scripture. There must be something God wants us to learn from it.

Sermon

Today's reading from the Letter of James jumps right on the preeminent *perceived* problem with James, and that problem is “works” and the emphasis of works or lack thereof in the Christian's life of discipleship. And that problem is especially

troubling among Lutherans because Luther had such an adverse opinion toward James, specifically because of the problem of works. For example, Luther disliked the Letter of James so much that when he published his translation of the New Testament in 1522, he separated James, along with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation and placed them together at the end of the Bible, and prefaced them by writing:

"Up to this point we have had to do with the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have from ancient times had a different reputation."

And about the Letter of James specifically, he prefaced that James:

“wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, but was unequal to the task in spirit, thought, and words. He mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture. He tries to accomplish by harping on the law what the apostles accomplish by stimulating people to love. Therefore, I will not have him in my Bible to be numbered among the true chief books.”

And while that criticism may be shocking today, his attitude toward these books was not so shocking in the context of the Middle Ages when most people had no access to a Bible, let alone one translated into a language they could read and understand.

Well, that was fun, but what does that have to do with us and the reading for today?

I'm so glad you asked. In a word, everything.

Most modern theological scholarship holds this opinion: While Luther is right, James is not wrong.

Yes, Luther is right. The repentant thief on the cross rebuked the unrepentant thief and turned to Jesus and begged, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Where were the good works? Luther was right – faith alone.

Zaccheus, the wee little man and tax collector, struggled to catch a glimpse of Jesus, but Jesus had no trouble seeing him and invited himself to dinner at his house and

because of his experience of Jesus, Zaccheus promised to repay all he had cheated, to which Jesus responded, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Where were the good works? They hadn't happened yet. Luther was right – faith alone.

So you see, we are saved by faith alone, it is true – but without a period or exclamation point. There is more to this preeminent perceived problem of works.

At the beginning of this passage, James wrote,

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?

Martin Luther's answer would be an emphatic "YES!" And I would agree if the scenario was a deathbed conversion or something of that nature. But that is not who James is writing to. James asked faithful Christians what I hope you will all agree is a good question. "What good is our faith if we don't use it?"

True story; among my Lutheran pastor colleagues, we still debate this very issue. I and another colleague always take the position that James has taken, and usually, the rest take Luther's position. But they are *not* mutually exclusive positions. I agree, we are saved by faith alone. But given that we have faith, we ought to use it.

James gave us a perfect example:

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?

Allow me to put this same argument to you in a contemporary context.

- Wildfires are burning up the western United States. Thousands of homes have been destroyed and thousands are homeless.
- Last week Hurricane Ida hit the gulf coast and once again there is massive property damage and the disruption of thousands of lives.
- Then Tropical Storm Ida hammered the northern Atlantic Coast and caused unprecedented damage there.

What should the Christian's response be? "Tomorrow will be a better day." That's no good. "We'll pray for you?" Well, that is a good start. And in some situations prayer is the best we can do, but not in the three disasters I've mentioned. I dare say that all of us can help financially. If everyone gave a little, a lot of good could be done – just like the multiplication of the fishes and loaves. That would be a good work, but not because we need it for salvation, but because, given that we are saved, we are motivated to do good works by the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in thanksgiving for his life-saving death on the cross.

To this, James went on,

¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

In other words, don't tell me you love Jesus and understand that your love comes from knowing his dying on the cross canceled your sins, and because you're just so thankful you're going to sit on your hands. That is not faith in action. Faith in action is giving of ourselves sacrificially, trusting that there will be enough for us too.

Carol and I almost always watch the news together and we were talking the other day about how Ohio must be God's country because we never have earthquakes, or wildfires, or hurricanes. But that got me thinking, what would happen if we did have some kind of devastating event? Wouldn't we hope someone would come to our aid?

Faith and works go hand in hand, like peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, night and day, anchovies and mustard.

James must have known there was another opinion because he preempted it by writing:

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works."

Like they are mutually exclusive.

Imagine in the church that there were the navel-gazers over here who just have faith. "Praying for that bad situation over there. I just know God is going to rescue you. Just hang in there. Have faith." We have a lot of these people in the church.

Sometimes I think they are MINO's, *members in name only*. They just want to get their tickets to heaven punched. Faith alone *will* get it done but think of all that they have missed out on. If you've worked our Food Distribution, or Thanksgiving Dinner, or Red Door Café, or any of the other service projects we do then you know nothing beats that feeling that you matter. You matter to the world, and other people, maybe even other specific people.

And on the other side of the room, we have the do-gooders. Sweet people, those do-gooders. They are motivated by the plight of others and just step in, but for no particular reason. I wish more people in the world would do something, but it makes me sad that they don't have faith. What an example they are already. But what a testament to faith in Jesus Christ they would be if they just had faith. And I wonder about their salvation.

About this one without the other, James wrote,

^{18b}Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

What he is saying is that faith without works is dead. "Don't tell me about your great faith, show me, then I will know you are a Christian." And on the contrary, about himself, he said "I will demonstrate my faith, by the works I do."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

I have already alluded to the preeminent perceived problem that it seems like Paul and James are at odds over "works". Indeed, we are not justified by what we do in any way. However, true faith *always* results in works, but the works do not justify us. Faith brings us salvation; faith active in works demonstrates that our faith is genuine.

It is not one or the other. It is both.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, we give you thanks for coming to the aid of people who are desperately in need of the basics of human life. And we thank you for the ministry of James, who reminds us that while you do your work serving the world, you often do it through the faithful disciples of your Son, inspired and equipped by his Spirit, to do ministry in his name. We give you thanks for the salvation that has been won for us by your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Bless the ministry of good works we do in his name in thankful response. Amen