

“Faith Works”

September 10, 2017

Risk-Taking Mission and Service series

This Scripture from James may not be new to you. You may have heard it tens or hundreds of times before, or at least you’ve heard that phrase “faith without works is dead.” Every time we hear it, there’s a bit of a gut punch. James is one of my favorite parts of Scripture – and one reason why Luka’s middle name is James.

Author James (possibly the brother of Jesus - or at least someone writing in his name) would make a good Methodist if it were up to John Wesley. Wesley’s concern and commitment to faith and works - to personal piety and social holiness - is a hallmark of his legacy.

I’ll be honest - that’s a big part of why I find myself in the United Methodist Church. Certainly we don’t have a corner on faith and works coming together - that’s a call for every Christ-follower, but I deeply appreciate Wesley’s drive to make sure that his talk and his walk matched. He was willing to admit when they didn’t, but his desire for himself and those who wanted to follow Christ was to make sure that faith and works were connected.

In our Methodist tradition we have Social Principles. They are not church law, but are “a prayerful and thoughtful effort...to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation. They are a call to faithfulness and are intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit. The Social Principles are a call to a prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice.” And they cover everything from human sexuality to poverty to the rights of children.

James moves us to see that faith is practical. Faith is practiced in the world where we live. It’s not kept to ourselves. It’s not only taken out when we worship. Worship is a time when we honor and praise God, but it’s also a time for us to hear God speaking and calling us to act on the faith we claim!

James is a letter written to Jewish Christians who were living outside of Jerusalem – and many of them were rejected by both Jews and Gentiles. They didn’t fit in. So, the letter offers some practical advice – staying connected to God and hearing and doing God’s Word. James is clear and to the point – and much of it is as challenging now as it was long ago.

Thomas More, all the way back in the 16th century said, “The things, good Lord, that we pray for, give us grace to labor for.” His statement calls us to put our faith into action – going beyond what we pray for and doing what we can to make it happen. It means showing our faith in Jesus outwardly in all areas of our lives. I’ve seen the same sentiment all over social media lately put even more simply: “Pray and do something.”

It really is a call to what's known as "risk-taking mission and service." Bishop Robert Schnase says "all that we do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever be part of the community of faith" is risk-taking mission and service. It makes us look outward - even beyond what's comfortable for us, recognize the need that we might not see easily, and take a new step not only to meet a need, but also be transformed personally in the process.

While I was in seminary, I interned at my home church one summer. Part of the plan was to connect to a church in Lansing that was doing a lot of outreach in an impoverished community. We were going to offer a summer VBS-type program. I was excited and ready to change the world! I was ready to offer Good News to others and change a lot of lives!

It wasn't a bad goal, but what I learned very quickly was that mission was more than just offering something. I was changed by the experience because I noticed how God was already present in the community and in the people. It was just giving something; it was also receiving something and being transformed in the process.

So, as much as we say that religion shouldn't be a topic of conversation, James would say that faith isn't a private matter. Yes, your personal relationship with God through Christ is your own - no one else's. And our prayer life and time spent alone with God is essential to faith. But if we claim to have a relationship with God, there must be public demonstration of it.

Faith in Jesus Christ isn't to be kept to ourselves. It must be shared and expressed in community. I don't know of a place in Scripture where it says that living out faith in God means never sharing it with someone else. That's why we worship together, work together and fellowship together. The Kingdom of God is built piece by piece when God's grace is visible in the world. And to be visible, God's love must be shown boldly and openly.

James' expression has stood the test of time - "faith without works is dead." We live in the tension. Yes, we believe in God, and we're justified by faith. But what we believe must inform what we do. Believing something and saying we believe it isn't enough.

Think of time when you've watched someone say one thing and do another. It's easy, right? We question a person's integrity when that happens. Better yet - think of a time when you've said one thing and done another. We've been there, too. We struggle with a disconnect between words and actions, especially when it comes to faith.

To claim the name Christian demands commitment - to worship, fellowship, study, prayer, serving, and giving. To claim the name Christian means to care - about people we like, people we don't like or understand, and people in need.

I read this statement: "People should be able to look at the way Christians live and begin to understand what the Gospel is about. Our lives must tell them who Jesus is

and what he cares about.” That’s a powerful reminder to us! Needs of others aren’t met by just our words; needs are met by our faithful response.

James tells us that faith acts - faith works. Regardless of the struggles we face, Christ-followers are people who live transformed lives because of the experience of a risen Savior in Jesus Christ. John Wesley used the term “holiness.” Holiness is both personal and social - loving God with heart and life. Both of them must exist if we want to be faithful to God who has put us in relationship with the world.

So the challenge is before us as we hear about the good work in our community and consider where we are. I’m very aware that we can give money and stuff, and that’s important. But how might we enter into relationship and offer time - a precious gift - so that others know the love of God in Christ? It’s a move from transactional mission to relational mission, and it’s vital to our personal spiritual growth, our growth as the Body of Christ, and the transformation of the world.

I’m challenged by the question that James asks: ***What good is it...to say we believe, but then don’t act? What good is it...to know the needs, but refuse to help?***

What will we do? How will we be inspired to act in a new way - to be sent forth to serve - and be changed by faith that works?

Thanks be to God. Amen!