

Our reading this morning comes from the Letter of James, who was probably the brother of Christ, to an unknown Church. Our reading is from chapter 2, verses 14-26. Listen now for the Word of the Lord...

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? *Can faith save you?* 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? *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ **Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.** You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.* Thus 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. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed (Joshua’s) messengers and sent them out by another road?

*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” **This is the Word of the Lord...thanks be to God.***

So last week, I was contemplating what kind of a message to bring in recognition of this being Scout Sunday. And, I’ll confess that on the heels of a very busy week, I was tempted to

just stay on the lectionary and preach whatever came out of it. But, you know, here is the reality of it all...if we cannot see how God's Word speaks to us in all situations...then what value does it really have? (Shift)

Now, Sarah Young and I have been planning this service for several weeks now. She came to me months ago and told me the date, we talked about how many Scouts we might have, we decided to "process the flags" in and have some of the Scouts take up the offering, and then last week I roughed out an order of worship and sent it to her to review with her troop.

Well then earlier this week, Gary Luff, who is the Unit Commissioner for this Boy Scout District contacted me and set up another appointment to come by and go through the service with me as well. We thought about the flags and the stands, we set them up to see where they best fit, I added some instructions for the Scouts on the order of worship, and we even established future plans for me to teach some of their Religion Merit badge classes. SHIFT

Now... everyone here probably knows that the Boy Scout Motto is "Be prepared". Gary, himself, is an Eagle Scout (scouting's highest rank) and of course, now, through his and Sarah's positions in Scouting they are both primary models for up and coming Scouts. **So, I belabor the point to say that both of them have lived out the motto of their organization quite effectively.**

So, this week, as I was reflecting on all of this and thinking about my text for this sermon, it didn't take long before I heard the voice of God saying... "Richard, James chapter 2, 'Faith without works is dead.'" *Now, I don't know if y'all realized that or not, but that is how it*

usually happens. At some point during the week a big booming voice comes from the sky, speaks to me...and viola! A sermon is born! Its frightening and wonderful all at the same time.

So, Gary and Sarah as we prepared for this service, both fully represented one of the key principals of their organization, which is defined in its very motto. Now, if you look up the definition of a motto...it is *"a short sentence or phrase that expresses the beliefs or ideals that guide an individual, family, or institution."* Hmm...that sounds kind of like a creed, or something like that, doesn't it?

But the key is HOW they represented this ideal of "Being prepared." What they did not do was simply walk around talking about how they should be prepared. They did not go out onto the street and start accosting people saying, "You know...you need to get prepared." **But instead they lived it out or expressed that motto through their actions, their deeds, their works.** They made the connection that their organization teaches them being prepared is a core value, and so it is a value they use to guide their works, their deeds, and their very lives.

So...motto's, just like faith, are empty words unless we live them out. Unless we show others what they look like in "real life encounters and interactions." For when we do that, we put visible flesh on an invisible ideals and beliefs.

Now every week, I get up in this pulpit and I try to put flesh on ideals and beliefs. I am trapped inside this traditional understanding that the sermon must be primarily about words. This is why preachers so often use real life stories. We want desperately to illustrate the Biblical ideals we read, hear, and speak...so we try to make them **visible** through the imagery of our stories.

But what I love is that wonderful quote, which is falsely attributed to St Francis of Assisi, but regardless it says, “Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” Now, what St Francis actually wrote was, “let all brothers preach by their deeds.” But, either way... you get the point. **“Actions speak louder than words.”**

Mottos, creeds, confessions, frankly, they are all worthless unless we make them visible through how we live them out. And, friends, I have said it before, and I will say it time and time again, it is so hard to do this when it comes to living out the Christian faith. I failed miserably on it this week when I did not help someone, who wanted my help, simply because I did not have the time. But, thanks be to God, that at some point in this whole equation...there is always Grace. (Shift) **Which, brings me to a theological tension I want to lift up today in regards to our reading from James.**

Now, Martin Luther, the Great Reformer of the 16th Century, absolutely hated this Letter that James wrote to the early Church. **He called it “an epistle of straw.”** Now, if you have ever worked on a farm and harvested grain, you will know what is of greatest value is the seed or the kernel. The left overs of the plant, which grew that seed or kernel, are called the straw. Now, Jesus used this analogy often in his parables, he called it the chaff to be burned off after the good seed had been harvested. Chaff, straw, the dead remnants of a plant, whatever you want to call it, it is not considered to have any significant value, at least not compared to the value of the kernel or the seed. So, Luther, it is clear, didn’t believe James’ Epistle of “faith without works is dead” had **any** value as compared to the Gospels **and more importantly for him the letters of Paul.** Let me explain.

Paul says in his letter to the Romans, in Chapter 3, that we are justified by Faith in Jesus Christ. Not by works of the law. Paul then goes on in Chapter 4 to use Abraham as an example. How Abraham, who pre-dated Judaism, who pre-dated God's giving of the Law to Moses, who was not asked by God to initiate the Covenant of circumcision ***until long after he had responded to God's call... by FAITH.*** And Paul, says, quoting Genesis 15:6 "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." So Paul's entire argument is that no good deed can make us righteous before God, no amount of work we can do to justify ourselves before God. There are no amounts of Law abiding actions that grant us salvation... **other than believing...other than faith in the one who IS righteous; in the one who has already performed the action, the deed, the work that justifies us before God, the one in whom was fulfilled all the law and the prophets...and that is Christ.**

But, then we have James who says, "Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.* Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'"

So we have two authors, two early church theologians, using the same individual as a model for apparently two competing principals. It sounds confusing.

Now Martin Luther was a catholic priest, who was initially a Monk and during his Monastic life, he was obsessed with his own salvation. He lived in fear that Jesus was like "a Hangman for his poor soul," a fierce Judge who would come in time to judge his actions...and his heart. Luther then became obsessed with confession. He would spend hours confessing

his sin, in hopes that he would be ready for Christ's judgment. But as soon as he walked away from one confession he would have a thought that he believed threw him back into judgment. Finally, one of his superiors sent him off to study Theology and it was there that Luther finally understood what Paul was saying. FAITH, in Jesus Christ is what justifies us, not our own righteousness, not our own deeds, but Christ's righteousness, Christ's deed.

You see, Luther discovered Grace working through faith. It was a realization that would eventually cause him to butt heads with what were, at the time, corrupt Church leaders, **who used the fear of judgment as a way of extorting money and exerting control over the masses. And it was Luther's questioning of these practices, in light of his personal discovery of grace**, that would spin off the Protestant reformation, and eventually set into motion movements that would help to bring much needed reform within the Roman Catholic Church.

So, you can see that a major Protestant theologian, like Luther, who was so heavily invested in the idea of Salvation by Grace, and a movement that was founded against the idea of "earning" salvation, would encourage anyone to place James' epistle on the highest shelves in any library...you know, the ones just out of reach for most people. SHIFT

But, now its time. We have enough space now, to talk about the fact that our response to this amazing grace has a lot to do with how we treat people.

Paul, for the record, was not against good deeds. Paul believed that when you came to faith, where baptized, and received the Holy Spirit you also received the fruit of that Spirit which are wonderful ideals like: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Gal 5) Things you think would come naturally when the power

of the Holy Spirit dwells in us. But, Paul also said, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”(Rom 7) So, we can see that Paul too struggled with this idea of what comes after, when we are justified by grace working through faith.

Being justified, being saved, then does not automatically make us good people. Instead, it is the beginning of a process that has the clear potential to make us better people...but this is a process that occurs only by the power of the Holy Spirit and one that we will continually strive for but never fully achieve in our lifetimes. But we strive for it nonetheless.

James, I believe, is simply telling it like it is (this is how he rolls). How can people know you have faith? How can people know that you are a child of God? How can people see that you are disciple of Jesus Christ? How can people know that one half of what Christ called the greatest Commandment is “to love your neighbor as yourself”, unless you make your faith visible through your deeds of love, and charity, and humility...just as Christ modeled to us?

So, here’s a weird sermon image for you: Ethanol in America is made primarily from the kernel, the seed of the corn plant. Experts calculate that it takes 1 unit of fossil fuel to produce 1.5 units of Corn Ethanol, a gain of only a half a unit. In Brazil, however, they use sugar cane, and they use the whole plant, seeds, chaff, straw and all. And, when they use the whole plant, they get 8 units of ethanol for every 1 unit of fossil fuel used to produce it.

James says “Faith without works is dead”. Luther thought this was a theology of straw. Maybe Luther didn’t realize how valuable straw would become one day.

Friends, invisible faith can only be made known when we live it out visibly. Our creeds, our confessions, our Bible are all words that guide us in what we are to believe...***but just as importantly, they guide us in how we are to do.***

So, here's praying that the words of James will be relevant in our lives. That our *faith (will be) active along with (our) works, and (that) our faith (will be) brought to completion by them.*"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.