

Sermon - Proper 23 B Zion, Pembroke Sept 5, 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen

Martin Luther called the Epistle of James an “epistle of straw.” I can understand his reasoning. The church of his day needed to hear the good news that we are saved by grace through faith, not by our works or effort. The message of the Epistle of James is that “faith without works is dead.” That message seems to contradict Luther’s message.

A deeper reading of both Luther and the Epistle of James shows that they are not contradictory. Luther said, “Faith is not idle knowledge, but a thing that receives the Holy Spirit and justifies us.” (Formula of Concord, pg. 121.99)

Luther also said that faith “frees us from death, brings forth a new life in our hearts, and is a work of the Holy Spirit.” (Formula of Concord, pg. 161.64) Luther describes faith as an active power within us, a power that changes us, transforms us to be more and more like Jesus, transforms us to obey God’s commands, a power that gives us new life in Christ, a power that justifies us and leads us to salvation.

That kind of faith results in good works, or pushes us to do good works. That power within us will not allow us to sit idly by and do nothing when our neighbour is in need. That faith will not let us rest until we have done all that we can do for our neighbour. All of that aligns very well with the message of the Epistle of James. For James, faith is not a set of facts that we carry in our head; faith is action.

If you see someone who is naked and without food, and you offer only kind words, that person is still naked and hungry. Our kind words haven't changed that person's situation. But food and clothing would help. And then, doing what you can to help the person find a job would do even more to change his/her situation.

That is not normal human behaviour, that is faith in action. Normal human behaviour is to look after ourselves and our needs first, and let others look after themselves.

Jesus calls us out of "normal, sinful behaviour" to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. If we have a coat and our neighbour doesn't, we give our coat to our neighbour, and trust that God will provide what we need to replace the coat we gave away. Or if our neighbour lacks food, we give him/her food, and trust that God will enable us to have enough food for ourselves. Faith includes action, or even more, faith is action. So is love. Faith that does not include action is dead. Using Luther's words, faith is power within us.

That power doesn't come from within us, it comes from the Holy Spirit. Both faith and the Holy Spirit are God's gifts to us. We do not earn or deserve either of them, but we can resist or refuse them.

Over time, if we repeatedly refuse to follow the prompting of our faith or of the Holy Spirit to help someone in need, eventually that prompting will fade away to nothing. Our faith will be dead. We will be like most unbelievers who only serve their own needs and wants.

The real point I am making is that faith does not flow out of a vacuum. It flows out of our relationship with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God doesn't simply pour faith in to us. He provides situations and circumstances that test our faith or enable our faith to grow.

I can't see into your hearts or lives, so I can't speak to your situation; I can only speak to my own. My faith has grown in leaps and bounds as I have learned to trust situations and circumstances to God and let Him show me what He can do.

I have learned by experience that God's timing and God's ways are not my timing or my ways. I want prayers answered and things done immediately. I have learned that God does not share my sense of urgency.

Sometimes I trust a situation to God, but then want to take it back, or offer God some help in getting the situation moving in the direction I would like it to go.

Neither of those help my faith to grow. My faith grows as I learn to wait patiently, focus on God, watch and listen for direction from Him. Sometimes God provides specific direction, things that I need to do; other times I simply need to pray, watch and listen. God does all the work and I am amazed by what He accomplishes.

I get to know God by regularly reading my Bible – that tells me who God is and how He relates to people; what God likes, what He dislikes, and how I can please and serve Him.

That knowledge about God leads me to do as Psalm 34 suggests, "taste and see that the Lord is good." Trust God, trust a situation to Him and let Him show you what He can do.

The bible says that God is trustworthy, keeps His promises, loves me so much that He sent His Son Jesus to pay the price of my sin so that I can receive eternal life through my faith in Jesus.

Another message is that God is life and gives life. We receive that life through our relationship with God.

The more I learn to trust situations and circumstances to God, the more I have come to realize that all of what I just highlighted is true. Everything God does is for our benefit, although that isn't

always obvious, especially when He doesn't follow our timetable or doesn't act according to our expectations.

But when I do leave a situation in God's hands, and am willing to accept whatever outcome He desires, I am blown away but what He accomplishes. Living by faith is never a losing proposition, although there may be times when it may seem so. We look around at what others are able to have and enjoy, and we see ourselves doing without some of those. But we still have enough; we still have much that we are able to do and enjoy.

We have a relationship with our God who loves us and who will never forsake us; we have our family and friends; we have our church family who will share our burdens with us, and who will celebrate our joys with us too. And we have our faith in our God who will carry us through anything that life sets before us. God, and our faith can carry us through any circumstances

because we know the end of our story – eternal life in God's Kingdom, with our Lord, and with those who have gone before us. Our faith is not dead. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit; it is God's power living within us. It empowers and enables us to love God and our neighbour; it gives us new life in Christ; it justifies us; it saves us. Amen.