

"A Demonstration Of Faith"  
James 2:1-10, 14-18

September 9, 2018

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

School has begun for the children in our community. There is now an emphasis on getting to s class, reading the textbooks, learning the knowledge, doing the homework, passing the test, and eventually participating in a ceremony, clad in robes, in which you receive a piece of paper that says you've graduated. You've accumulated the knowledge. You've met the standards. And, having done all that, you don't have to go back again. Sound familiar?

Today is what we call in the church Rally Day and what we do today may sound a lot like what our children just did in the community. We start up the Sunday School and the Midweek School. (As an aside, one might wonder what why we ever close these things down. But that's a topic for a different sermon.) There is now an emphasis on attending Sunday School, Confirmation Class, and Midweek School regularly, reading the Bible, learning the stories & doctrines, doing the homework and memory work, passing the tests, until eventually you participate in a ceremony in church, clad in white robes, in which you receive a piece of paper that says you have confirmed your faith. You've learned the Biblical teaching. You've met the standards required of you. And, having been confirmed, you never have to go back to class again – which is what many people do.

Many don't exercise their Christian faith by attending worship. Many don't strengthen their Christian faith through participation in any sort of Sunday School or Bible Class. Yet, if you ask any of these people, "Do you have faith in God?", most, if not all, would answer, "Yes! Of course I do!" This then begs the question, "What is faith?"

Before answering the question, "What is faith?", we should consider the question of what faith is not. Faith is not an academic accomplishment. You don't get faith because you learned Bible Stories or memorize the Catechism. Now, don't get me wrong. While the teaching and learning of Bible stories and Christian doctrine is of the utmost importance, that knowledge is not faith. People believe they have faith simply because they acknowledge the existence of God or because they know the Bible. If that was all faith was, then Satan and his demons would have the strongest faith. Immediately after our text, James remarks, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! (James 2:19)

Faith is also not an excuse, justification, or permission for committing sin. Faith is not a "get out of jail free" card which allows us to sin without consequence. I heard a pastor tell a story about a member in his congregation who committed adultery, left his wife, and moved in with his lover. When this pastor went to confront him with his sin and call him to repentance, the man was quite surprised. He said the pastor, "Pastor, I have faith. I still believe in Jesus as my Savior and faith is what saves me." Over the many years of my ministry, I have seen that way of thinking in many people. Sin is denied, ignored, or excused because a person claims to have faith. Believing in Jesus means you are able to do whatever you want or redefine God's law so that it fits your

behavior. In preaching about grace, St. Paul asks these rhetorical questions in Romans 6, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” He then answers his own questions in the strongest possible way that the Greek language can do it, “By no means!”

Finally, faith is not alone. Good works (that is, obedience to the will of God) will always follow faith. A faith which does not produce actions in accordance with the Law of God as found in the Ten Commandments is worthless. James gives two examples of good works in the text. First, we are to love all people within our Christian family the same. We are not to show partiality. If we show partiality to people in our church assembly, favoring some and being critical of others, we are sinning, even if we talk strongly about faith and how much we believe in God.

Secondly, we are to show that love in action. James talks about seeing a brother or sister in need – needing food or clothing –. And talking a good game, but doing nothing. Wishing them well, offering to pray for them, and pronouncing God’s blessing upon them, but doing nothing to help them is sin. James’ words are sharp and to the point, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” The implication is that it cannot. He goes on to say, “Faith by itself, if it does not have good works, is dead.”

If you claim to have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, but are basing it only on knowledge and the fact that you were confirmed and have a certificate to prove it, that is not faith. If you are comfortable in your sin without any desire to turn from it and are using the fact that you believe in God as the justification for it, that is not faith. If you talk a good game about your faith, but then fail to do the things God wants you to do, that is a dead faith.

Faith is the trust in the Lord Jesus Christ we have for the forgiveness of sin and everlasting life. While knowledge is part of faith, it is not the essence of faith. Faith is the reason, the motivation, and the source for obedience to God. That obedience to God – good works – is never optional and will always follow faith.

How does faith fit in with our relationship with God and are sanctified lives together? There seem to be three misconceptions about this. First, some people believe that salvation is our own doing. We are saved because of the good things that we do. As good Lutherans, who have had “justification by grace through faith” pounded into us by faithful pastors and teachers, we should be beyond that.

Secondly, some believe that God does the saving part in our relationship with Him and we do the believing part. These are people who made decisions for Christ based on their analysis of what the Scripture says and what they have come to know. This, too, is also non biblical.

Thirdly, some believe that God does the saving and that God creates the faith that we have, but we are left on our own to do the good works that follow faith. Salvation is all God’s doing. Sanctification (living holy) is all my doing. Unfortunately, many Lutherans seem to think this way.

The fact of the matter is God alone does all of the work of saving us through the perfect life, the sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Knowing the right thing does not save us. Jesus saves us. Our contribution to the process of

salvation is the contribution of sins. Trying our best to turn from sin and do what is right cannot forgive us.

Jesus perfectly obeyed the Law of God in our place. We have His obedience as our own, not our pitiful attempt at righteousness, as we stand before God. Our good efforts do not pay the debt of our sin. Jesus paid the debt for our sin with his blood shed on the cross as He offered up his life there. Jesus forgives our sin. Jesus is also the one who will raise us up on the last day and give us eternal life. He does it all when it comes to salvation.

God also does it all when it comes to creating faith. We all know very well the famous passage from Ephesians 2, where Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." God does the saving because of His grace – His undeserved love for us – and we receive that by faith. Yet even faith is a gift created by God and given to us in our baptism or whenever we first hear the Gospel. That faith is nourished and strengthened by the Word of God.

God alone works the good works in our lives. Ephesians 2:10 is probably the most forgotten verse in the entire Bible. We stop reading after the "salvation by grace" verse in Ephesians 2:8-9. However, after telling us the good news that we have been saved by grace through faith, Paul goes on to write, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." God has created you and me to do good works. They are not optional. Yet, at the same time God is the one who prepares the good works we are to do so that we may "walk-in" (live in) them. These verses show God's desire for us to do good works; God's role in doing good works; and God's blessing on our good works. As Paul writes later in Philippians, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12-13)

James is not accusing his readers of having dead faith. He still refers to them as "brothers and sisters". However, he is warning them of the danger of this very real problem. And so, on this day in which we emphasize the teaching of the Word of God and training in the faith, let us all heed James' warning.

Continue to learn and confess the faith, as well as obey and live according to the will of God. Do the works which fulfill the royal law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." God will provide the opportunity to do such works, the ability to do such works and the resources to do such works. Don't try to intentionally do good works in order to prove your faith. The reaction by the sheep on Jesus' right hand at the day of judgment when He commends them for their good works is to express surprise and ignorance. They had no idea that their simple acts of kindness were actually serving Jesus. Let the good works flow naturally from faith.

Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount not to allow our good works to become about us so that we use them to brag about our faith. Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." Our good works are not to serve God nor are they to call attention to ourselves. Our good works are to serve our neighbor.

If this all sounds very difficult, that's because it is. Our sinful human nature fights against the invitation to faith and is the call to do good works. Faith continually needs replenishing and strengthening. The call to Divine Worship and the studying of the Word of God may seem to be good works which we do in order to show our faith. While it is true that these activities are covered under the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment, they are not so much a matter of obedience, but an invitation to be renewed and invigorated in your faith. A faith that does not desire the Word of God, the Sacraments, and the fellowship of the people of God is as strange as a hungry man that does not desire food, drink, or a restaurant in which to consume these things. It is a weak faith, if not a dead faith. As one person said, "A faith that cannot get you to church probably cannot get you to heaven."

Since faith is renewed and invigorated by the Word of God and Sacraments, use these often, not only when you're attending Sunday School and not simply to be confirmed, but to be strengthened to live a life of faith which shines forth in good works.

Faith is to believe and do. Faith without works is dead. Works without faith is dead as well. Having been given the gift of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ by God the Father through the working of the Holy Spirit, believe and trust in all that God has said and done and obey all that God has commanded. This is not to earn your salvation, but a response because you have already been saved. This is not that you might gain faith, but to show forth the faith which you already have. The last verse (before the closing doxology) in the well-known hymn, "Salvation unto Us Has Come" sums it up very well:

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone  
And rests in him unceasing;  
And by its fruit true faith is known,  
With love and hope increasing.  
For faith alone can justify;  
Works serve our neighbor and supply  
The proof that faith is living. Amen