

Show Me Your Faith!

James 2: 14-24

**First Presbyterian Church
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Faith apart from works is dead. Faith without deeds, faith without sense, faith without integrity, faith without being aware of others, faith without living in the real world is not worth much to the people around us. That's the jarring word from James today.

James approaches his brother Jesus in ability to paint an illustration that sinks right to the heart of the matter in only a few vivid words. "Suppose," he says, "A brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to him, 'Go in peace, be warm and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" Faith that is sentiment not backed by real action is a gooey, smarmy spread of *nothing*.

If he were writing today, James might say, "Suppose one of you is suffering a loss. And the loneliness has his mind so scrambled he can't even think what to do next. If one of you says, 'Now, if you need anything, if there's anything I can do, just call,' what good is it?" People in grief, in shock, in loneliness, in distress can't figure out what they need and then decide who to call and what to ask for. "If you need anything..." is a phrase I use when I want to wish someone well but don't know what to do and want to make myself feel better. Faith that matters considers the person in need long enough to determine what I can do to be of use in this situation. And then does it. It may be leaving the person alone; it may be running an errand; it may be praying; it may be staying all night. But faith that is alive acts in deeds that are real, not words that are cheap.

This James guy gets right to the point. Growing up with Jesus in your household might cause you to be that way. People through the centuries haven't always liked the book of James for this reason. Martin Luther called it "an epistle of straw" and suggested it shouldn't even be included in the Bible. And it was this passage in particular that galled him. Luther was fighting against a monolithic church which had people all bound up in doing acts of penance in order to get right with an angry, account-keeping God. It was his life's work to crack through the wall in people's minds and set them free with the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. By grace alone we are saved. And we receive grace through faith, but

even that faith is a gift of God. Having endured scorn and imprisonment to get the gospel free from the shackles of legalism, Luther didn't want to hear the notion that faith requires works and deeds to be alive.

But in our guts, we know that there really can be no separation between faith and works, between commitment and expression. Real belief issues forth in real action. Living *in* faith generates the living *out* of love.

There's an old story about a high-wire artist who brought his act to Niagara Falls. He managed to stretch his wire across the raging cataract. A crowd soon gathered to see what would happen. The acrobat took up his balancing pole, and mounted a ladder to his wire. He called to the crowd, "Who believes I can walk over these falls and return?" The crowd cheered their approval. Slowly, deliberately the high-wire artist made his way over crashing waters and returned safely.

He climbed down the ladder, and retrieved a small bicycle. He asked the crowd, "Who believes I can ride on this bicycle across the falls?" They cheered their faith. The man placed the bike on the wire and very deliberately took his time feeling for his balance. He built up the tension. Then he rode on the wire over the rushing falls. On the way back, above the rapids that crashed 150 feet below him, the artist lifted his hands from the handle bars and returned safely to his ladder. The crowd was wild with excitement.

"Now," he said, "Who believes I can ride the wire across the falls on this bicycle with someone sitting on the handle bars?" The audience cheered. "Do you believe I can do this?" YES! YES! Do you have faith that I will go and come safely? YES! YES! "Then who will come and ride with me?" Silence fell on the crowd. He asked them again, "Do you believe I can ride someone across? Do you have faith?" YES! YES! "Then, who will come and ride?" Again there was a hush. No one spoke. No one moved. The man descended from his ladder. "You do not believe," he said, "You have no faith." He left them sadly.

Faith without works is no faith. Not because we have to work to gain God's favor. But because real faith issues in loving action. Living Christian faith is not just signing onto a creed written on a piece of paper. It's not making a transaction with the Lord where I say "I believe in you so you give me eternal life." Faith looks at Christ with even more wonder than watching a man who can ride a bicycle on a tiny wire across a raging river. And then real faith says, "I see who you are. I

know where you're going and I want to go with you. I'll ride with you. I'll let you take me wherever you wish." Faith gets on the bike and lets Christ drive.

It's really a matter of remembering who are our Lord is. Think of God We believe in the One who made the heavens and the earth in all their splendor. God set the stars blazing in their places. He created the plants and the animals who live in this incredible balance. We breathe in the sweet air and release carbon dioxide as waste; but then the leaves of the trees gather in the carbon dioxide as food and return sweet oxygen to us. This beauty sings out "Design!" And the very turning of the world, the passing from night to day, and season to season as fragile life flourishes on this planet is a hymn of praise to the Creator. James described him, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (1: 17).

This great God, looking upon the world he has made is moved with love. He sees the results of our free will, and our ridiculous choices to try to be our own gods and all the evil that has resulted. His heart breaks. He does not remain aloof. Seeing our distress, he clothes himself in skin and comes to us in Jesus Christ. And Jesus walked among us, beholding our grief and weeping with us. Seeing the death in the world, he called forth Lazarus from the tomb as a sign of the eternal life he would create for all. Seeing our infirmities, he touched the broken and they were healed. This was a sign, a taste, of how the world will be restored. Seeing our lostness, he sought out the worst of the worst and gently led them home. Seeing our sin, he absorbed it into himself, returning forgiveness. Bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, he took the rage and anger of the world onto himself in the cross. He received the ocean of our sin and declared it but a drop in the bucket to his forgiveness.

In Jesus Christ, a new and living way to God has opened which cannot be closed. In Christ your sin and the damage you have done and the messes you have made have not been overlooked or brushed aside. No, they matter; they are real. But in Jesus Christ, they have been dealt with in the depths, paid for in blood, redeemed in his mighty acts of love.

As James himself wrote, "Of his own will, [God] brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (1: 18). You are a new creation in Christ. The remaking of humanity in the humanity of Jesus is the firstfruit, the taste of the harvest of the world's renewal which will come to pass. When you and I begin to grasp who Jesus is, we discover we are part of a great plan, a grand design to restore and magnify all creation (Eph. 1: 10).

Do you want a piece of that? Do you want in on that action? Once you taste the goodness of God, you can't keep that to yourself. When the love of God gets kindled inside us, it shines forth. Living faith pours through daily life. Now our channels get clogged from time to time. The excitement over who God is may be dulled by distractions and drudgery. Glitches cut off our faith life from our work life. But opening up the flow again isn't really very hard. Perhaps it's just a matter of recognizing the various levels on which faith is expressed, and adding a little bit of intention to each one. Let's look at three levels of expressing living faith.

1) Living faith shines through whatever you do. A few weeks ago I was talking with the guys in my Thursday Bible Study about our neighborhood UPS driver. I said, "I think that guy is a Christian. He just makes such a point to speak to us. He seems so joyful. It's like he feels he is bringing presents to people he loves." The guys said immediately that they knew who I was talking about. They'd noticed him too. So one afternoon, when we were expecting packages, I kept my eye out for him. After he dropped the package, I ran out after him. "Hey, we were talking about you the other day." He looked at me with curiosity. We said, "That guy has to be a believer!" The UPS driver looked at me and beamed, "With all my heart," he said. His name is Will, but he says most people call him Brother Will. He clocked off with UPS and started a break while we talked. We prayed together and exalted the name of Jesus together. I love seeing him around the neighborhood. He's on a mission to bless people and because of it, God opens many doors for him to share his faith.

The great poet George Herbert once wrote, "Teach me my God and King, in all things thee to see. And what I do in anything, to do it as for thee." Living faith sees God present in every endeavor. Living faith analyzes chemicals, saws wood, encounters clients, sweeps floors, paints a canvas, mows grass as if for the Lord himself. This Herbert tells us, makes even "drudgery divine." It is the magic formula for transforming life. Living faith is expressed whenever we do any good and honorable work with skill and commitment, as for the Lord.

2) But the pain of the world and the love of Christ will push us to the next level. We realize there is more need and more for us to do than simply living in the context of our daily lives. We will want to enter ministry: intentional acts of sharing the gospel and the love of the gospel. We get out of our daily context and onto the mission field of becoming reading buddies at Buchanan School, or mentors at Gardere Christian School. Maybe we lead a Bible study at Catholic

Presbyterian apartments. Or, perhaps we leave work a little early to sort and stack clothes for the Purple Cow, or to work the desk at the Downtown Christian Outreach. Or perhaps we drive out in the parish to visit a child with Christmas presents, or simply to be an advocate. Maybe we teach the stories of the faith to children in Sunday school. Or pick up someone for church. Living faith moves out from our usual context, seeking mission fields of greater need.

3) Sometimes we realize the need to **change contexts entirely** and to act in concert with others. So the church deploys missionaries to Beirut, or helps dig wells in Mexico, or rebuild houses here that were flooded. We send a team to Russia to partner with a church there, and we celebrate all the callings to mission that come upon our members—rejoicing as people give away their lives in the gypsy streets of Romania or in the busy streets of Nairobi. Concrete expressions of faith can occur on a large scale. Maybe your company begins to care more for the air our children breathe than the law requires—because you have a greater vision. Maybe our city acts in partnership with churches to create better shelters for the homeless because the leaders have a greater vision. Living faith thinks big, because we have a big God. It takes all of us to make such sending happen. It takes those willing to go and those who stay home and support those who go with our prayers and gifts.

There can be no split between faith and works. Works without faith are cut off from the source and fail to enter the grand vision of God's purpose for the world. Faith without expression in love is a narcissistic piety that would scare anybody with a brain away from the church. We serve a God of magnificent love, a Creator who passionately tends his creation. We serve a Christ of infinite forgiveness and tender mercy. There can be no split between church life and work life. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. And he is the savior of every aspect of life. He's done more than ride a bike across Niagara Falls. He has worn our humanity in perfect obedience and love, and has ridden it up to his Father in heaven. He wants us to ride with him to a life lived in the splendor of God's vision for the world. Do you believe he can carry you? Get on the bike. Get into the world with his love on your lips and his grace in your hands.