

Last week, and all through September, our Epistle readings for 5 Sundays in a row are from the Letter of James.

The Epistle from James is a little bit different from the rest of the New Testament. Of all the books in the New Testament, James seems most like a book that could be found in the Old Testament. James has that Old Testament vibe. In fact a tiny minority of scholars have postulated that it was a Jewish work that was later updated and Christianized by inserting some references to Jesus Christ. I don't buy that argument at all. But that gives you a sense that James is different.

The book of James is traditionally attributed to James the Just, aka James of Jerusalem or James the Brother of Jesus. I preached about this James back on April 11 during Easter, talking about James and the Resurrection. James of Jerusalem is a different James from the 2 Jameses who were part of the twelve disciples. This third James was not a disciple. In fact, during Jesus' ministry, brother James seemed to be opposed to Jesus. But after the Resurrection, James did a 180, and eventually became a very important leader in the early church. He is retroactively regarded as the first Bishop of Jerusalem.

The Epistle of James has had a rather tarnished reputation for the past 5 centuries. But there's been a renaissance in James scholarship in the past few decades. However, in many Christian circles, James is still controversial. James is in the Bible. But many folks don't like him. And they especially flag on a statement we heard in today's Epistle lesson. It's probably the most misunderstood statement in the book of James. And I know that some of you grew up in Christian traditions where this verse was regarded as one of the worst verses in the New Testament. At the end of today's Epistle, James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."¹

Or as another translation puts it:

"Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless."²

This statement was basically non-controversial for almost 1,500 years. But then, it caught the eye of Martin Luther.

Now, Martin Luther was a theological genius, and I'm a fan of his. But even theological geniuses can make mistakes. And one of Luther's biggest mistakes comes in misinterpreting this verse. And ironically, it's tied up with Luther's greatest theological insight. But Luther took things too far.

To make a long story shorter, Luther rediscovered the importance of faith/belief in the New Testament, especially in the Letters of Paul. Faith had been emphasized in the past in the church. But then it was downplayed for over 1,000 years. What you did became more important than what you believed.

¹ James 2:17 (NRSV—the version we read in church)

² James 2:17 (NLT)

But Luther rediscovered the central importance of faith/belief/trust in Jesus Christ. And he held it up as a concept. And he polished it. And he pointed to it. And he emphasized it, even in the face of great opposition, and even in the face of death threats.

But then Martin Luther looked at James 2:17: "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead."

And Luther misinterpreted that verse. And he overreacted. And Luther basically pulled it out of context. And he set it up like a straw man in opposition to Paul's theology. And then he tried to knock it down. And he used it to disparage the entire Epistle of James, which he famously termed, "The epistle of straw," the worthless epistle.

This wasn't fair to what James was saying. James was not saying works or deeds were a replacement for faith. He wasn't saying works were a prerequisite for faith. What James was saying is that your actions, your deeds were an outgrowth of faith. Your works or your deeds are like fruits which your faith brings forth.

In fact, earlier in chapter 2,³ James stresses the importance of belief and faith in Jesus. And he does so in chapter 1 as well.⁴

And there's a further important clue a few verses before 2:17. James says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?"⁵

And note that qualification. "If you SAY you have faith..."

And to keep trying to make a long story shorter, this is the most important piece for James. James is trying to push back on people who make faith/belief some sort of intellectual assertion.

'Oh yes, I think that Jesus is important. I also think that Austin is the capital of Texas. I also think that the earth is the third planet from our sun.'

But that's not faith. That's just making an intellectual assertion that you believe something to be a fact. In fact, James says as much a couple verses after our lesson ends. He says, "You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this."⁶ Intellectual assent doesn't win you any brownie points.

Ultimately for James, faith/belief/trust is not about intellectual assent to some factual proposition. Knowledge is not trust. Faith/belief is about what you do with your life. It's about trust. It's about placing your life in God's hand and living the way God calls you to live.

³ 2:1

⁴ 1:2-3

⁵ 2:14

⁶ James 2:19 NLT

Faith/belief in God is a vital first step. God doesn't save you because of your deeds. Salvation comes through faith. But you don't stop there. A living faith will produce fruit. Faith will be reflected in the way you live your life. Belief will be manifested in your works or your deeds.

So Martin Luther was setting up a false dichotomy when it came to James. Luther was framing the question as faith OR works.

But James is talking about faith that produces works, or faith that works because it does things in the world. For James, your faith impels you to live in a different way, and is made knowable by your deeds.

And James will have much to say about living in a different way. And I'll return to that topic in 2 weeks when talking about James chapters 3 and 4 on September 19.

But for now, I want to make a slight turn. Tomorrow is Labor Day on the secular calendar. And I would like to suggest that James helps us understand what our calling as Christians is in our daily occupations.

Faith is not something confined "up here" {point to head}. Faith is lived out in the things we do and say. Belief and trust in Jesus Christ are not about agreeing with the Nicene Creed, though that may be important. Belief is not about having pure doctrine. It's ultimately about the way we live.

And that means that the Christian faith cannot be confined to the time we spend in worship on Sunday morning. It has to spill over and be part of the rest of our lives.

The Christian life is as much about the way we live Monday through Friday as it is about the way we worship on Sunday. And James would suggest that our deeds, the ways we act Monday through Friday, are probably more important than the things we say we believe on Sunday morning. The faith we proclaim and celebrate on Sunday needs to be lived out in what we do the rest of the week.

For most of us, that means living out our faith in our workplaces or our schools. For those who are retired, it means living out our faith in the places where we interact with others during the week. It is in these contexts that we have the greatest opportunities to truly live the Christian life.

Our faith is shown in the way we treat others. We have an opportunity to show Christ's love with our deeds, in the way we treat other people, whether it's those we spend considerable time working with, or those whom we might interact with only briefly.

In fact, you have more of an ability to impact the world in your work than I do. First of all, there are more of you. You have many more opportunities than I do to make a positive impact in the world.

Plus, parish priests have some constraints—we're confined in some ways in an ecclesiastical ivory tower. You're out in the world more than we are. You thus have more opportunities to let your faith be made known through your deeds.

Thank you for all the things you do in our world. God has placed you where you are. Do what you do for God's glory and for the benefit of his people.

Let your faith be known through your works as you work.
Let your faith be known through your deeds in your daily life.