

McCabe United Methodist Church
“Faith and Works”
Pastor Gary Walters
September 6, 2009

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the book of James, Chapter 2. The book of James has been equated, or the analogy has been used, as something of the Proverbs of the New Testament and there is definitely that practical, earthy-kind of feel to the book of James. The other part about James, though, is he is definitely not out to win friends. He tells us exactly how it is. He is having an argument with some folk and he is pretty blunt. Hear these words; I'm going to start at verse 14 and just read all the way through 26.

"My friends, what good is it to say you have faith when you don't do anything to show that you really do have faith. Can that kind of faith save you? If you know someone who doesn't have any clothes or food you shouldn't just say 'I hope all goes well for you, I hope you will be warm and have plenty to eat.'. What good is it to say this unless you do something to help. Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead. Suppose someone disagrees and says 'It is possible to have faith without doing kind deeds', I would answer 'Prove that you have faith without doing kind deeds and I will prove that I have faith by doing them. You surely believe there is only one God, that's fine, even the demons believe this and it makes them shake with fear. Do some stupid person want proof that faith without deeds is useless, well our ancestor Abraham pleased God by putting his son, Isaac, on the alter. Now you see how Abraham's faith and deeds worked together. He proved that his faith was real by what he did. This is what the scripture means by saying 'Abraham had faith in God, and God was pleased with him.' That's how Abraham became God's friend. You can now see that we please God by what we do and not only by what we believe. For example, Rahab had been a prostitute, but she pleased God when she welcomed the spies and sent them home by another way. Anyone who doesn't breathe is dead and faith that doesn't do anything is just as dead."

The word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God!

Let me start with a story. There was a young man, an only child, and the father had passed away when he was just a boy. The mother really kind of hovered over him and doted on him, but he was a really good kid and the light of her life, the apple of her eye. As kids do, he grew up and graduated from high school and it was with a twinge of fear and trepidation that she received the announcement from him that he had been talking to the army recruiter and in fact had signed up and would be heading off to basic before

too long. Well, a particular point of concern for her was the faith question. She had heard what army drill sergeants could be like and was afraid that he would be persecuted for his faith. She had toted him off to Sunday school and to worship and when the church doors were open, they were there. It was a very central part of her life and also a very central part of his life. She was afraid that he would be ill treated or made fun of or be persecuted for his faith. The day came when he got on the bus and headed off to basic. A number of weeks later he called home, just to check in and to catch up. As they were visiting the mother finally asked "Well, how is it going? Are they picking on you for being a Christian?" and the young man answered, "Oh, Mom, don't worry, they don't even know yet."

Well someone had better be able to tell! Hopefully what we believe does indeed make a difference in how we behave. For this young man where no one could tell the difference, or had found out yet, hopefully the same is not true of us, that someone can tell, that people have found out.

But, as it turns out, James' adversaries really were no better off, but had really fallen into a similar trap, or a similar issue, a similar problem. For James' audience, they had the words, they talked the talk, but they did not walk the walk. They didn't have actions that backed up their profession of Christian faith. They didn't live out that Christian lifestyle. They could say all the right things but the actions weren't there. In the case of this young man, he believed in his heart, he knew all the right things in his head but it stayed right there. Yet, still there was no action to go with that faith and that belief. Either way, neither one is entirely wrong. You have to believe the right things, or it helps to believe the right things. You need to be able to give a verbal account of your faith, so neither one is entirely wrong, but neither one is entirely right either. Because, if we don't embody, if we don't put life, if we don't put flesh, on our faith, then what good is it. That's the question that James confronts us with this morning.

He is really attacking this whole perversion, or twisting of the faith that says a confession, to say the right thing, equals salvation apart from what we do. There is a huge difference in terms of what believing means. When the Bible says belief, it basically is the verb form of faith. But, there are two conflicting world views that run through our culture. One comes from the Greeks and the other comes from the Hebrews. The Romans conquered the Greeks and they loved everything Greek, including their philosophy and exported it to the rest of the Roman empire and then into Europe, which is our ancestors, and they carried it with them, and it has been prevalent in western thought ever since. For the Greeks you could believe something like it was a book that you could just set on the shelf and it's "Yep, I believe what this says and it's

right there, see, I believe that." And you could do nothing else with it. It was simply a matter of intellectual knowledge. But, the Hebrews did not know anything of that kind of belief. For them to believe something was to act in a certain way. You did not know it, you did not believe it, until it changed the way that you lived or the way that you acted. James is in that tradition, he is in that school of thought. There is no way that he could see to separate our knowledge, or our faith in Christ, from our actions and our behaviors toward others and toward God.

James basically just makes the point that faith that does not produce action is dead, just as dead faith does not produce action. But, he also believed, and teaches us here, that Christian work come from Christian faith.

A word about Paul, because Paul is very clear, and I agree entirely, that we cannot save ourselves. Particularly in his letter to the Galatians, normally Paul starts in with this warm greeting and then this wonderful prayer to whoever he is addressing. Well in the book of Galatians he just cuts to the chase and starts wacking them, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? How could you be so foolish as to start with faith and not move to works." But what Paul means by works and what James is talking about, really do not fit into the same category.

What Paul is addressing is a group of Christians who were adopting Jewish customs, Jewish rituals, in order to earn their faith. Circumcision, ceremonial washing, eating or not eating certain foods, and Paul says, you cannot earn faith by mere religious ritual. It doesn't work, and it does you no good.

There is a proverb that I have heard, "God helps those who help themselves." Well, its a good proverb and I understand what it means, but on the other hand I beg to differ. I understand that God helps those who help themselves, is that we need to take some responsibility, God gave us a brain, hands and feet, and strength, for a reason, but on the other hand, God does for us exactly what we cannot do for ourselves. That's the whole point. If we could save ourselves then Christ's mission to earth was a complete waste of time; and I don't believe that for a second. Christ came and sacrificed his life to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He came and died for us that we could have grace. That we could have access to God. It doesn't matter what we do, we cannot earn that access. There is nothing we could have done, nothing we can do, period. It's all Christ, and it's all by grace.

But, on the other hand, there is an appropriate response to that grace and to faith in Christ. Hopefully, someone can tell the difference in terms of how we live. A phrase

that I like, that I came across, is that we need to take upon ourselves the yoke of the kingdom. That we need to respond appropriately and become a part of the body of Christ, and part of becoming the body of Christ we then put flesh to God's grace and God's holiness and God's love.

What does that look like? A few examples run through my mind, I'll give you a couple of them. An example I used with my confirmation parents and students this last week has to do with a magazine that the Upper Room puts out. It's a devotional written by teens for teens, but what you might not know (if you've seen the Devozine, they are in the literature racks around here sometimes, or maybe you have seen it in other places) is that started because a youth group in Hartford, South Dakota. This group about 15 years ago, one of their confirmation assignment was to write a devotion and then all of these devotions got put into a book and then they shared them with their fellow classmates and youth group members. They really enjoyed this experience fo sharing their faith with one another. When the devotion book was done, they really missed not having that so they looked for something like it. They found the Upper Room and thought, "well that's fine, but it's written by a bunch of old people, it doesn't really relate to us" and so they talked to their pastor, (the president of the youth group, her father was the pastor, so that helps) and the youth group asked if there was anything out there and there wasn't. He encouraged them to do something about it. Well, they created a petition and took it to, at that time, the South Dakota Annual Conference, that they would endorse this and sent it on to the general conference. Well they gave their pitch at the annual conference and the annual conference said that it sounded like a great idea. They sent it on to the general conference and the general conference looked and said "Wow, this is great" and so they gave the mandate to the board of discipleship and the Upper Room to produce what is now the Devozine, which is what our confirmation kids get to do in their confirmation, part of it anyway. Amazing what just a few kids can do.

We could list examples all day long, but it gets closer to home, I don't know how many times when I've come across different young folk in our congregation who talk about this old guy who just loved youth. He loved to spend time with them, he loved to encourage them, he loved to be a part of the youth group and the different events that they did and really mentored and guided a lot of people, just through that care and that concern, and really putting flesh to Christ, that tangible expression of love. I met Jim Petrik only once at annual conference, but he left an impression. He left a deep impression on this congregation.

All of that, the question that comes to me through all of this is, what do I do, or what WILL I do, to put my faith into action. I ask you that question also. What deliberate act

will you take to put your faith into action. There is a lot of possibility there. Starting next week for a couple of weeks the ministry fair will be out here and there will be tables with all the different ministries and groups and classes, all sorts of opportunities that we at McCabe have through our church to put our faith into action. But, don't let it stop just there because I hope our picture of the Kingdom of God is a lot bigger than that and we will take up this yoke of the kingdom in and through our church and at the work place and in our classroom, our school, and our homes, and wherever we might find ourself so that someone can tell the difference, so that the world can tell the difference.