

The story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is one of my very favorite encounters in all of the Bible. On top of that, it's Labor Day weekend when I usually like to reflect on the meaning of our work and I get to recall the words of my working-class grandfather who liked to say that he was so proud of me for getting a college education because it meant I wouldn't have to work for a living!

But I am committed to preaching on the epistle today and let me be honest with you: this is less of a sermon than a cross between a lecture and a commercial. It's a bit of a lecture because I want to think through with you some theological questions raised by the Letter of James and a commercial because I want to invite you to come join me for a three-week study of this Epistle, which we'll be reading from throughout the month of September. So let me get right to the point: Martin Luther called the Letter of James "an epistle of straw," and he didn't mean it as a compliment!

Luther had a pretty high view of Scripture. He believed that the Church should not claim any doctrine that couldn't be backed up by the Bible. But his frustration with James (and the Book of Revelation, too) reminds us that even Luther had what some have called a "canon within the canon." While he looked to Scripture to guide him toward God, he still had favorite texts and less than favorite texts. (James was a "less than favorite.")

We are saved, Luther reminded us, not because we are good or because of the good we do, but because God is good. We are *justified by grace alone, through faith*. As a pastor and Biblical scholar he discovered in the writings of St. Paul especially (and particularly in Paul's Letter to the Romans) that the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ is that the work has been done and we can do *nothing* to earn God's amazing grace or unconditional love. We can only *receive* that love as a gift and say "thank you." In fact, although it took about four hundred years to admit it, the Roman Catholic Church today agrees that Luther was essentially right on this crucial point: we are justified by grace and not works. And while Episcopalians are notoriously difficult to pin down on matters of doctrine, on this issue it is pretty safe to say that if we Episcopalians agree on anything at all we are in agreement on this point as well: *we do not earn grace*. We do not "get into heaven" because we have followed all the rules.

So if we are all, in this sense, "Lutherans," what then do we do about James? Why even read it if it's just an epistle of straw? The thing is this: James is wrestling with a different question. He isn't asking about who is saved or how we are saved. He is, I think, challenging a congregation to live more faithful Christian lives. He doesn't say it exactly this way but we might say that he's challenging the baptized community to live into the meaning of their baptism: to live lives that reflect what they profess with their lips to believe.

Last weekend we read from the first chapter of James and were challenged to be not only *hearers* of the Word but *doers* of the Word. James used the image of a person looking in the mirror but then walking away and forgetting what they look like. He said we need to remember who we are and then live out of that reality, as people committed to doing justice and loving mercy and especially by living that out through a commitment to widows and orphans. And then we heard today about how faith and works go hand in hand: that faith without works is dead. And even that faith alone, without works, cannot save us.

Last night one of our more honest parishioners said to me at the end of the service: “Rich, don’t take this the wrong way, but…” I always brace myself when someone begins that way. But then she said:

*I listened to every word of that sermon but I just don’t get it. I heard those words read tonight from James and all I could think was that it was so beautiful and so right, so much of what the Church is about. We are meant to walk the walk and not just talk the talk, right?*

Yes, precisely. But what I guess scared Luther is that when you say that faith alone without works cannot save us it starts to sound like it is circling back to a kind of works-righteousness, like our salvation is dependent upon how much good we do. It can be heard as if what James is saying is that if we aren’t doing enough good that we won’t be saved. So the question is, “how do we put these things together?”

It helps to remember that James isn’t really in an argument with Luther, even if Luther has a quarrel with James. The scholars tell us that James was written in two stages: initially as a set of moral instructions by the brother of Jesus in the early sixties of the first century. (Several decades, in other words, after the death and resurrection of Jesus.) James was an elder in the Church in Jerusalem. Later, this letter was expanded and edited and distributed in the late eighties or early nineties by someone else.

But here is the key: it was almost certainly written by and to and for *Jewish-Christians*. This is in contrast to most of the New Testament: Luke and Acts and John and all of Paul are all focused on *Gentile* Christian congregations. Paul goes out to the ends of the earth, to Galatia and Rome and Ephesus to reach out to Gentiles (i.e. *non-Jews*) to share the good news of Jesus as Savior of the World. But James gives us a glimpse into a more solidly *Jewish-Christian* community from the late first century, a community rooted more deeply in the Torah and trying to be both faithful to the traditions of Moses *and* to follow Jesus as Messiah.

Paul is trying to figure out how to integrate Gentiles into Jewish Christianity without making them second-class Christians. And so he insists, especially in Romans, that everybody is saved the same way: not on how faithfully they adhere to the Torah but by the grace of God. Paul’s understanding of the gospel was that it created something radically new: a new creation in Christ in whom there was no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. And there is little doubt, I think, that he was right about that.

James, on the other hand, is asking how people who have been raised on Torah might now appropriate their commitment to Jesus as Messiah while still remaining faithful to what their Jewish grandmothers taught them. James sees and wrestles more with issues of continuity between the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and how that leads directly to a new life in Christ. He’s asking practical questions about the kind of work congregations are meant to be doing and he’s clear that we don’t exist for ourselves but for the sake of the world and especially the poor. That mission is where the rubber meets the road.

One of my friends here told me she was curious to take the class I'm leading on James for two reasons: first, because she has always liked James; but secondly, because she was curious to see whether I would come down on the side of Luther or of James?

But in fact she knows me much better than that: I am proudly an Episcopalian and among other things that means I don't feel obliged to choose! On the one hand, I do think Luther was right about the thing he was right about—we are saved by grace. On the other hand, I think he overstated things in his dismissal of James as having nothing to teach us. Some theologians deal with this move by distinguishing between what they call *justifying* grace and *sanctifying* grace. I am a better Biblical scholar than theologian, but I find that distinction quite helpful.

We are saved (or justified) by grace alone, through faith; not because of the good we do but by God's mercy and love and extraordinary generosity. If you want to grasp something of that amazing grace, check out Paul's Letter to the Romans. But in receiving that gift we are changed. We begin a process of becoming a new creation. As we receive that gift and then begin to respond to it by becoming givers ourselves, our faith bears fruit. We are made more and more like the One who has saved us; sanctified by love. If you want to grasp something of that amazing responsibility, then check out the Epistle of James.

While every journey of faith will have both hills and valleys, if we aren't in some way continuing to grow in our faith then one does have to wonder what is going on. Maybe it didn't really take at all. Or maybe it died somewhere along the way or is lying dormant and needs to be rekindled. To hear God's Word is to mark it and learn it and inwardly digest it—and then to live out of that reality.

As we turn the page to September, we are a week away from things gearing up again around here. We commission lay ministers and renew our Baptismal Covenant next weekend. Church School resumes and adult educational opportunities abound. (Did I mention I'm doing a study on James?) A congregation like this one exists so that we can continue to grow in our faith and to that end James is a word of good news for us. We are not only loved but called to love back—both God and neighbor. And especially to show that love for the poor who are so easily forgotten and abused or called lazy. We are called to become instruments of the peace we have been received and to be agents of healing as we have experienced through Christ. That process of formation is never finished, because God is not yet finished with us. But we are called to be not just recipients of grace but agents of it and for that work we really do need to consult the wisdom of this little epistle.

For today, that is probably way more than enough. We'll keep listening in on James for the next three weeks and whether or not the sermon addresses it I hope you will be listening for a Word of the Lord there. And did I mention I'm doing a three-week study on James? I invite you to come and check it out; there is a sign up sheet on the table in the narthex and we begin this Thursday night at St. Clare House. We've given Luther a lot of air time today in a sermon that is supposed to be about James, so it is only fair to let him have the last word today.

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*