

**Sermon for October 11, 2015 (Proper 23 adjusted, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 2:14-16; Psalm 90:10-17; Mark 10:17-31

Title: Faith Without Action is Dead

“My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it?” (James 2:14).

What is the benefit of ideas in one’s mind, or a feeling in one’s heart, or words out of one’s mouth if these things are not given life in corresponding actions?

I hope that by now you can begin to see the characteristic flavors of this little epistle of James. Here we have another one of his imaginary scenarios which is intended quite clearly to hit his audience hard with the call to mercy in action!

“What good is it [to say words of blessing to the poor] if you don’t actually give them what their body needs?” (James 2:16).

If you read the Bible on a regular basis, you might notice how refreshingly clear and simple this text is! James writes as directly as possible. There’s no mystery, no hidden parable, no double meaning. It’s nearly impossible to misunderstand him!

“As the lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead” (James 2:26). Boom!

Now, what you might NOT know is that this text has been a regular source of controversy throughout the history of the Church!

This pericope from James is the primary reason why Martin Luther refused to include James in his German Bible. He had it put at the very end in an appendix, and he recommended that his churches not read it in the liturgy.

Luther called James "an epistle of straw", meaning that it lacked the firm weight and strength of the Gospel.

What was his primary concern? It was that James did not follow Paul’s preaching and say that we are saved by faith alone.

“Sola fide” – by faith alone. This was one of the rallying cries of Luther and the Reformers in the 16th century, and James did not fit into their theology very well at all. Brother of the Lord perhaps, but they did not like him!

But which matters more in God’s sight: my faith or my actions?

Luther was convinced that the core problem of the Roman Church was its dependence upon works, upon certain actions performed by human beings which produced righteousness and salvation, rather than salvation by faith alone.

So which one is it? Are we saved and delivered because of our faith in Jesus as the Messiah? Or because of our actions in keeping the commandments, as the Messiah pretty clearly seemed to teach?

To me, this debate reminds me of the classic Western scientific debate over the true nature of light. Since the days of Isaac Newton 300 years ago, there has been a struggle in understanding the nature of light. Is light made up of tiny, distinct particles called photons? Or is it a wave of energy without substance or mass?

When scientists study light, they find observable proof for each! So which one is it? Is light a particle or a wave? The correct answer? It is both.

So which one is it when it comes to God?
Is salvation a matter of faith or of actions? Yes! It is both.

Of course, scientists are no more content to leave that mystery as it is, than theologians are content to accept an unclear definition of the precise nature of saving faith.

But for our practical and realistic purposes, both are true.

You see, faith is our interpretive framework by which we make sense of our experiences.

Faith gives us a way to understand and make sense of everything in life.
And it provides us with direction for how to respond to everything in our lives.

So your faith is only seen, is only measurable, is only made real, by your actions.

The fact is that every single human action is governed by faith.

And in this sense, there is no such thing as an atheist, if we mean it strictly as someone without faith. No human being gets up in the morning in order to do anything apart from faith – apart from some framework which gives meaning and direction to their actions.

The problem that the Church is facing today is not that more and more people are lacking in faith, because – as I am suggesting, that is categorically impossible.

The problem is that more and more people are passive about their faith. They don't reflect on it. They allow their worldview to be shaped by the powerful forces of the media which communicate to billions of people in ways that were unconceivable just a few generations ago. And which have a very clear agenda of their own.

And that agenda runs directly counter to the heart-beat of James.

Someone asked me this week about the quote from Pope Francis which I shared on the cover of this month's AVE. It was his call for humans to pursue “a non-consumerist model of life, recreation and community.”

Non-consumerist. THAT means thinking about life apart from the making and spending of money.

It means trusting that my life – your life – is in the hands of God and that money is given to us as a divine tool to bless the lives of others.

It is this transformation of our faith, this radical re-structuring of our basic understanding of how life works, which is what the Lord Jesus is all about in the work of discipleship.

James demands that our faith manifest itself in mercy, risk and sacrifice.

To drive home his meaning, he points his audience to 3 crucial elements of their shared Hebrew heritage.

The first is the Shema, the ancient Hebrew creed recited daily by Jews for millennia.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The point is clear: to know about God does not afford you any advantage whatsoever. Even the demons know all about who God is and yet they are at war with God!

To skip ahead, the third element is quite unusual. James recalls the story of Rahab the prostitute who was “shown to be righteous” by receiving the Hebrew spies sent to Jericho. Not only did she have a shameful (and sinful) way of living, but she was a Gentile and had no knowledge of God whatsoever. And yet she risked everything for God by showing hospitality to strangers.

The second and primary reference is an obvious choice.

Abraham is the paragon of faithfulness and faithful action in the Hebrew Bible. Here James points to the classic story of the ‘Akedah, the binding of Yitzhak - Isaac, which was already an ancient, traditional story when James wrote this letter!

The ‘Akedah is the final test God gave to Abraham. It was a test to sacrifice his son, the son he loves, Isaac, and to do it with his very own hand.

For Jews, THIS is the supreme example of sacrifice, and it is exceeded for Christians only by the Lord’s sacrifice on the cross.

James is as clear as can be.

Our faith is shown, is manifest, is made real and alive when we care for the poor, when we take risks in receiving strangers, when we sacrifice that which we hold dear.

It sounds so clear, but it’s not that simple, is it?

I know that, for me personally, it often feels overwhelming to consider the needs of the poor.

- 60 million people are now on the move across the globe fleeing as refugees from violence and seeking a new home.
- 3 billion people live without reliable electricity.
- 6 million children die each year from things which are easily preventable and which you and I take for granted.
- Perhaps as many as 3 million people in the United States will experience homelessness at some point this year.

What actions can I take in the face of such overwhelming need?
Words, thoughts, ideas and feelings are not enough.

There is no easy answer, no quick solution, but of this much I am certain.

If you have not yet been confronted with the call to sacrifice something of great value and worth, you will.

In addition to the daily small opportunities to sacrifice which face us all, the time will come – like it did for the man in Mark’s Gospel – when each of us are faced with a clear call to action.

And if that call has come to you and you are grieving now because you know that you walked away and did not take the risk, do not fear. The Lord will again call you to sacrifice. May you have ears to hear it.

What have you sacrificed for God? When have you taken a bold risk for God?
When have you responded to the Lord by caring for the needs of the poor?

This is not about comparison. About who among us has made the greater sacrifice.
Only you will know what is a truly sacrificial offering when the Lord asks it from you.

“Abraham believed God, and God regarded him as righteous. And what is more, Abraham was called God’s friend” (James 2:23).

Let us show ourselves to be the friends of God through our readiness to sacrifice for others, through our willingness to take bold risks for God, through our actions to give the poor what their bodies need.

Because faith without action is dead. Amen.