

“Faith In Action”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 12, 2009

by Karin Wright

^{NRS} **James 2:14** What good is it, my brothers and sisters,¹ if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,¹⁶ 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? ¹⁷ **So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.** ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe -- and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² **You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.** ²³ Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? ²⁶ **For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.**

Faith and Works: What is the Christian life?

James has historically been kind of an unpopular book in Protestant circles. This passage is a hallmark of James and is one of the sticking points in its unpopularity. It focuses on works and actions coming out of one's faith, which for years, scholars thought went against Paul's teachings that we are saved by grace alone. The official wording in our Confessions is that we are "justified by grace through faith." This tells us that salvation does not hinge on us, salvation is a gift of God and our job is to accept, appreciate, and praise God for this. **And we do praise God!** And while it is true – we are not saved by our works, that does not mean our actions and our works are unimportant. James' whole point is that being a Christian should affect our whole lives.

The biggest theme of James is that of integrity and wholeness, which is James' language for consistency. All of James' harsh accusations are aimed at hypocrisy in which one's beliefs and actions don't like up so for James, *faith is not about just believing the "right things."* As the text today says "even the demons believe – and shudder." Christ's motivations and actions are for more than orthodoxy, and they are for more than grace.

I don't want to downplay the importance of grace here or invalidate our gratitude and dependence on God's grace. As a German theologian (Meister Eckhart) said centuries ago, *"If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, 'thank you,' that would suffice."* This is absolutely true. Thanks and appreciation for the depths of God's love for us is an irreplaceable gift. God gladly accepts our praise, but I'm not sure that is the only thing God expects of us

when we receive grace. Grace works in us. It does something to us, and does not stop with us. **Grace and faith are supposed to change us and gear us toward one thing: God's love and the sharing of that love.**

Asking how to love God and share God's love is one of the key questions in determining what a Christian life looks like, and it demands a faith that grows. It is one of the biggest things James is looking to answer in this passage. James would say it is in walking with God and doing our faith that we grow in faith. This is God's not-so secret lesson in this passage – works naturally spring forth from faith ... and works feed one's faith. Any individual who has been involved in mission activity can easily understand this concept. There is something very circuitous about working from your faith in that when you help another person, inevitably you find yourself having been helped by that same person and experience.

Ashtabula Trip: Several years ago, I took a youth group up to the city of Ashtabula, Ohio for a week of joint mission work with all the other Presbyterian youth groups in the area. It was a week filled with Bible study, fellowship, work, and enthusiastic Energizers. *(for those of us slightly outside of this age group or denominational experience, energizers are easy group dances to energetic and quirky and they are designed to... energize ☺).* This particular year, we had both middle school and high school youth with us. It so happened that once properly motivated; they worked through all of their assigned tasks much quicker than anticipated. Some of those tasks included putting down a new sidewalk for a family, cleaning out a fallen tree and limbs out of a house-bound woman's yard, and priming and painting a food pantry. The third night, I was scrambling to coordinate with the head of the operation to get some tasks for these youth to do the next day. As I did, the youth were talking about what they had seen and done that day. We were all concerned with doing, it seemed.

When I came back from my "organizing" phone call, the youth sat me down for a **serious** talk. They were concerned about the woman whose yard we had cleaned up. Some of them had gotten to talking with her and discovered that she was being bullied by the owner of the trailer park in which she lived, and he was threatening to take one of her dogs if the dog got loose again. The woman had three small dogs that were her life. She could not go outside to walk them so she would let them out on a dog run; one at a time, but the area was so cluttered that they could not go far or run well. Sometimes, one of the dogs would escape in the process of being let out.

The youth wanted to know what could be done for her. I listened as they told me of their problems with the situation, and wondered where it might take us. I listened as **they began to get righteously indignant that there would not be someone to check up on this woman and care for her after we left.** There were no easy answers to their concerns. It wasn't fair that we should have comfortable homes and families while she struggles to keep up her trailer and enjoy life with her dogs. Life was a daily struggle for this woman. What surprised me about the youth's conversation was not that they had been disturbed by their experiences with her that day, but that **they were so angry to live in such an unfair world.** These upper middle class white kids encountered a situation quite different from their own understanding of home. *As they worked for her physically by cleaning up her yard, their experience was working on them spiritually.* **In the same way, all of our actions work on and impact our faith.**

This is where we find God's grace in our discussion of faith and works. Faith and works are designed to be a team process. Faith by itself is not faith until it meets action and the two of them work together to express that faith. The youth found their faith challenged, and they pushed and pulled at that faith through their work that week. In a very real sense, the woman was doing her own ministry to the youth by willingly receiving their help. It is not easy to be vulnerable to others – especially to those you barely know. I cannot speak for the youth, but as an observer, I certainly felt my own faith deepen when they did not allow their frustration to stop or halt the acting out of their faith. They worked to determine what it was they *could* do to best help their new friend in Christ and they partnered with her to try to solve a problem together. ***God was certainly moving in the hearts and hands of all.***

The youth did not completely resolve their concerns, but they went back to the lady's house and worked with her to put up a small fence around a garden just outside her door so that her dogs could be let out a little easier. After we went home that week, we corresponded with her several times and it was wonderful to see that relationship continue beyond one week. The situation was still not fixed according to the youth's desires because we knew she would not be able to weed her garden or do any physical work if the fence was broken in some way. **The truth is we do not live in a world that cares well for its orphans and widows. But that did not invalidate the work or care the youth showed for this woman, nor did it impede the woman's gratitude for a little extra help.**

Works: Big and Small. The key to understanding the relationship between faith and works is to realize they feed each other in very important and unseen ways. Not every work we do is a big benevolent mission trip, **most of the time our Christian 'work' is much more about how we conduct ourselves in the every day. Oftentimes, we do not even label it as ministry.**

Eli and the joy of ministry. Several years ago, I met a young man named Eli. He was involved with a local mission opportunity in Michigan that also involved a synod health team, and a group of volunteers from Ohio (which is how I came to the group). Our job that week was to put on health fairs in different locations that gave health screenings to migrant farm workers and their children. The different stations were eye exams, hearing exams, height and weight measurements, and finally a visit with a doctor. My job was usually shepherding kids and face painting.

During a Bible study with all of the workers, the leader talked about the gifts of the Spirit and how they all fit together in the Body of Christ like the different parts of the body. The leader then asked each individual to identify their own spiritual gift that they brought that week. Some mentioned hope, joy, encouragement, and laughter.

Finally, the task came to Eli to name his spiritual gift. He hesitated to answer and tried to say that he didn't really think he brought anything special to the health fair. I'm not sure what it was for certain, but Eli had a disability of some kind – either learning or otherwise. He was in his late teens, but did not attend high school. His mother, not wanting Eli to be embarrassed started to answer for him. The leader, however, cut Eli's mother off and said that Eli could answer for himself. Then the leader asked Eli what he had enjoyed most that week. He thought

for a moment, and then said that he really like making the popcorn and handing it out to the children.

You see, after the kids had gone to each station, they were allowed to get popcorn and get their face painted. At each fair, Eli lugged the big popcorn maker in along with all of its supplies and he would make batch after batch of delicious movie theater popcorn. The leader of the bible study smiled and said that was perfect. Eli looked skeptical, but then the leader reflected on how the other volunteers had trouble lifting and lugging some of the heavier equipment and they often got too bogged down to make the popcorn. Most importantly, the kids got genuinely excited about receiving their popcorn and loved showing Eli their name card with each station checked off proving they were ready for a treat. **This task that Eli thought was mundane and unimportant provided a great opportunity for shared enjoyment and fellowship. Truly, it was a gift and a ministry to many that week.**

As we prepare to leave this place and go out into God's world, I ask each of us to reflect on a time when we felt God's pleasure at what we have done. What do you do in your life that you have not labeled as ministry, and yet it brings God's love to the world? Maybe you took dinner to a family after someone had surgery or prepared food in the kitchen for after a funeral service. Perhaps you smiled patiently at the weary and exhausted salesperson and let them know you understood being tired and weren't in a hurry. Think about all of your actions (big and small) and how they might grow out of faith or hope. All of those faithful actions can also produce faith, in you or in someone else.

Whether it was something as big as being there for a close friend or family member in crisis or as small as handing someone a bulletin and whispering where they might find the restroom, our actions are important. **Think about that time you felt God's pleasure in your life and think of how this action came out of your faith.** And now think about **how this work or action strengthened your faith.** You have just recognized in yourself what James recognized in Abraham and Rahab as faithfulness. The common questions we should all be asking is this: what does God ask of me? What pleases God? **When we work towards living out the answers to those questions, we are living out of our faith,** and it is then that our faith is fed by our works and we can say "Thy will be done, God, on earth as it is in heaven." Thanks be to God.