

A Faith That Works

Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-4, 14-17

September 9, 2012

I.

Today's readings present the familiar theme of the purpose and meaning of faith. We shouldn't be surprised because faith is the foundation of our Christian lives. We read about it throughout the Bible. We try to apply it in our lives; often in difficult circumstances. And, if you're like me, sometimes we wonder if our faith is sufficient. And what is sufficient faith anyway?

Faith can be hard to pin down—if that's what we try to do with it. That's why some scholars and theologians have such different ideas about faith. Many of them approach it as an intellectual proposition; something to be examined, studied, analyzed, and defined.

And from time to time, we all probably find our faith receding into the backgrounds of our lives. That can happen at any time, but for some of us it occurs when things are going well, we're at peace with the world, and anticipating the next enjoyable thing on our schedules.

During those times at church we might repeat the post-Communion prayer without thinking about actually going into the world to do the work God has given us to do. Or we could routinely say the Nicene Creed without considering what it means to believe all those things.

And at this point I would like to digress and put in another plug for our course on the Nicene Creed beginning next Wednesday. It will focus on a practical application of the Creed to our lives, and if you have not signed up I urge you to consider it.

And practical application is central to all aspects of our faith. Faith is something we live, feel, and experience. It is part of the DNA of our spirituality because it is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit. That's why faith is so essential to our church family at St. Thomas. It's the glue that brings us together today.

Perhaps a story might illustrate something about faith. A fellow was at an airport departure gate, waiting on standby to fly home. The agent told him his name would be called if a seat became available.

And so he prayed, "Lord you know how I want to get home today. This has been a difficult trip. Please let me have a seat on that plane." And just as he finished, his name was called to come to the gate. He immediately stood and silently said, "Never mind, Lord, something just opened up."

What's wrong with that picture? The fellow didn't have much faith that God would answer his prayer, did he? And when he got what he wanted, he didn't think God had anything to do with it.

This stands in sharp contrast to the faith of the woman in today's gospel, and it does not reflect James' understanding of faith. And so let's take a look at those readings.

II.

Mark's gospel and James' letter offer two perspectives on the matter of faith. I'll start with Mark and the Syrophonecian woman, and then conclude with James.

And as background, I should mention that the term "Syrophonecia" refers to a geographical area north of Palestine that once was part of the ancient Phoenician empire, but that in New Testament times had been occupied by Syria. Today it is part of Lebanon.

This also meant that the area was enemy territory, so to speak, for Jesus. It was not the land of the Hebrews, but rather pagan Gentiles. And the reading makes clear that the woman who asked for Jesus' help was a Gentile. This turns out to be a key factor in the story, which centers around the unexpected and surprising faith that this woman had.

And we might wonder why Jesus and the disciples were even in the lands of the Gentiles anyway. During Jesus' lifetime he focused on teaching the Jews, not the Gentiles (Mt. 10:5-6). We know, of course, that Gentiles eventually were included in the salvation Jesus offered, but their hope became secure through his death and resurrection, not during his life (Ro. 1:16, Gal. 3:28).

One of the reasons for that was the frequently repeated revelation that Jesus came to fulfill the law (Mt. 5:17, Lk. 24:44, Jo. 12:38, Ro. 10:4, Gal. 4:4-5), and the law in this case was the Hebrew law given to Moses and the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai.

So Jesus had to appear first as Messiah to the Jews. After all, what would Gentiles have thought if Jesus told them he came to fulfill the Hebrew law when that law did not even apply to them?

But yet, Jesus helped a Gentile woman. She came to him and said that her daughter was possessed by a demon, and asked him to cast it out of her. In Matthew's version of the story Jesus replied that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24), and then in both versions he said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs."

And, as frequently happens in the gospels, Jesus was speaking in metaphors. Children's food described God's blessings for the Jews, and his reference to dogs seems to be a dismissive and derogatory way of referring to Gentiles.

So, what about this? Was Jesus politically incorrect? Was he narrow-minded? Of course not. But we don't have to dwell on it because look what happened next. This woman didn't miss a beat, did she? No sooner had Jesus said that his food was for God's children, not Gentile dogs, than she said that even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table.

That proved her faith to Jesus, and a blessing did fall from the table. Jesus gave her and the disciples a preview of things to come for the Gentiles. Her daughter was healed. She asked only for a dog's portion; a crumb from the table, and she had faith that a crumb would be enough. You might say that her dogged approach paid off.

III.

And now let's move to our reading from James. That reading asks whether our faith is a lively, active faith that is pleasing to God, or is it like a dead battery that still is hooked up inside the car, but doesn't do anything?

James said, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." And at first glance, that might seem in conflict with St. Paul's assertions in Galatians (2:16) and Romans (3:28) that we are saved through faith, not our works of the law.

The answer is that neither James nor Paul claimed we can obtain salvation only through our works. Non-believers can do good works. Good-hearted atheists can do good works. Both men said faith was essential, and both recognized that true faith produces good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

God wants our faith to be manifested in the things we do. And he wants this because an active and vital faith serves and benefits the Christian community, and it builds up the Church that is Christ's body. A dead faith will not do that.

God does not want a mere intellectual acceptance of church doctrine, nor does he want routine ritual repetition of the words of our liturgy. He wants us to believe in him and trust in him in response to his love for us, and he wants us to do it from the heart.

This is the meaning of faith. If we have that kind of faith we cannot help but do good works. Our good works naturally flow from our faith. Believing and acting are inseparable. It is impossible not to do good works if we have a saving faith.

And so we ask ourselves, do we go through the motions, or do we truly have a faith in God, through Jesus Christ, that flows from our hearts to direct our wills, that resides in our minds to govern our actions, and that translates into the Christian life through the things that we do?

IV.

In some ways faith has gotten a bad rap today. Many people in the secular world think of faith as a form of simple mindedness, a type of uncritical thinking that is beneath us as so-called sophisticated and educated people.

But I say that refusing to believe is the simple and uncritical part. It is easier to ignore something than to engage it. And it takes less effort to repeat timeworn clichés about the Bible than to actually study it. Nonbelief is more likely to come from wishful thinking than critical thinking. Faith takes some work.

And the way faith is most frequently described in the Bible is in the context of belief—belief that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was resurrected to offer us eternal life, and if we accept him in that way we will live in his presence forever.

That is the kind of belief; the acceptance of Jesus, that also automatically produces good works. To try to separate faith and works is like asking which blade on a pair of scissors is most necessary, or which leg is most important when walking. A distinction simply cannot be made because the two are inseparable.

That's why James described faith the way he did, and it is why a crumb from the table was sufficient for the woman in Mark's gospel.

So when we step out in faith and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and live according to his teachings our lives change. And the changes might not be what we expect. They might not be what we ask in prayer. But faith, by definition, is not something we cannot explain in human terms. If we could, it would not be faith.

Martin Luther, the great sixteenth century reformer, described the life of faith in terms of a ship. He said that faith is not just believing that the ship exists, but it also means stepping onto that ship, and putting ourselves to sea, and entrusting ourselves to it.

The church is an example of that ship, and a visible symbol of our faith. And when I say church I do not mean those parts of organized religion or commercial Christianity that give the church a bad name. I mean the church as Jesus intended it to be, a group of people who truly worship together, who care for and support each other, and who help and serve others in the community.

I believe that's our ideal here at St. Thomas. Because we are human we fall short of perfection, but we still try and we do so in faith. And when we try, we find that our faith always sustains us, and at times it is all we have and all we need. It is the way to live and experience the more abundant life that God wants for us. *Amen.*