

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 9, 2018
Isaiah 35:4-7a • Psalm 146 • James 2:1-17 • Mark 7:24-37

Martin Luther famously called the Epistle of James, which we heard from a few moments ago, an “epistle of straw” because it had “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” For one thing, it contains no discussion of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. If you didn’t know anything about Jesus and all you had to go on was James, you would learn virtually nothing. But more troubling to Luther was that James seems to suggest that our behavior matters more than our belief. After all, James sums it up, “faith without works is dead.”

So how do we think about the relationship between faith and works? Are we justified by grace through faith? Are works just a nice side effect? Or are works actually the whole point? And if works actually are the whole point, then why come to church on a Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning instead of going out and doing something useful?

Now, I already made a big mistake in this sermon. I knew it was a mistake. I knew I shouldn’t do it. And I did it anyway. And that mistake was starting out with what Martin Luther thought about James. And Luther isn’t necessarily wrong about James, but he’s not the most helpful conversation partner either. Because when you read Luther, there’s a question he’s always getting at in one way or another. And even if that question wasn’t explicitly written out, it shaped everything. It shaped the way he read scripture. It shaped the way he viewed his family. It shaped the way he viewed the church. And for Luther, that question was, “What must I do to be saved?” That was Luther’s core existential query in his life. And it was the question he believed other people were plagued by as well. Now what’s the problem with that? The problem is that few, if any, of us actually ask that question anymore. And that doesn’t mean the question is wrong, but we have to do a little bit of translating.

Because we all have questions that seem to drive everything we do. Except for us the questions are, “Am I being a present enough parent for my kid?” “Are people just putting up with me because they feel bad for me?” “Am I ever going to get to be who I truly am?” “Am I processing this grief the right way?” Now what’s at the root of all those questions? It’s not that fear that Luther had about not being saved. It’s a worry about needing to justify ourselves. To justify our identities. To justify our worth as individuals. To justify our experiences of life. The question that more of us come back to again and again is What do I have to do to be accepted as a whole person? That’s the question that shapes everything that comes after.

So not only do we often come to James asking the wrong question, but the vocabulary we use to try to answer it is too narrow. Think about how we normally talk about faith. When we talk about faith, what we normally mean is your personal belief in the existence of God. So faith is a) private and b) intellectual. But if you read the New Testament, you see that faith is always a communal activity. That’s why Jesus calls a whole bunch of disciples and that’s why they spend so much time discussing the meaning of what Jesus is doing. And faith isn’t just intellectual. It’s not just memorizing a bunch of creeds and learning a bunch of Bible trivia. It’s about trust. It’s not just a box you can check on a survey.

Or think about the way we normally talk about works. Faith is complicated, but good works are simple, right? Last week, the Washington Post ran a story about San Francisco, where the tech industry has given the city one of the nation’s fastest growing economies, but gentrification has also driven up housing costs at a near-unimaginable rate.¹ Some tech companies have started doing

¹ Scott Wilson, “San Francisco, Rich and Poor, Turns to Simple Street Solutions That Underscore the City’s Complexities,” *Washington Post*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/san-francisco-rich-and->

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outreach to people experiencing homelessness, trying to connect them to social services. So is it a good work to help someone experiencing homelessness? Of course it is. It's practically the definition of a good work.

Well, one tech worker interviewed in the story, reflecting on the city's housing problem, remarked, "I know I am part of the problem, the high housing costs, and I'm not proud of that." So let's take it a step further. Does it still count as a good work if the person you help is experiencing homelessness due, in some small part, to the industry that you profit from? Probably. But how much a good work? Ninety percent? Eighty percent? Or what if you help someone experiencing homelessness, in some small part, because you didn't want a shelter built in your neighborhood? Half a good work? A third? It's complicated. And if that example seems arbitrary and convoluted and overwrought, remember that we all live amidst countless situations just like that every day.

When we talk about good works, we think that we can decide whether we do good works or bad works. But they're often mixed up. Sometimes we unintentionally create social ills even while we're trying to pursue the common good. The problem with good works isn't that we don't do enough of them. It's that we think we can be the judge of our own actions. It's that we think we can count them at all.

So if the way we talk about faith and works is lacking, let's look at how James talks about them in today's reading. Let's start with faith. "My brothers and sisters," James writes, "do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?" So James is questioning these people's faith. And what's the evidence he has for questioning it? It isn't that they don't pray. It isn't that they didn't check the box on the survey. It's their acts of favoritism, or in the literal Greek, "face judging." It's about the way they view other people. Because faith isn't just about whether God exists. It's about whether God has done something. It's about whether the life, death, and resurrection of Christ has changed our relationship to each other. So that instead of just reinforcing the hierarchies of the world, what James calls favoritism, we live in the equitable and just community that Jesus created around himself. So faith isn't just about whether you believe in God. It's about what you believe about other people.

And so look at how James talks about works. Works are not, contra what we usually think, these kinds of discrete acts of charity that we parcel out whenever it's convenient. Works are what we do when we act toward others as if what Jesus says about them is really true. That's why James is making such a big deal out of favoritism. Because favoritism isn't primarily about how you treat other people. It's about what you believe about other people. The problem isn't that you don't welcome the "poor person in dirty clothes" the way you welcome "the one wearing the fine clothes." The real problem is that you think of the poor person as disposable or inconvenient or less worthy of your attention.

So works aren't about being nice to people. They're what we do when we recognize people's dignity. And our dignity, what allows us to justify our existence as whole people, is something that comes from God. But it's something we need to have reflected to us in the lives of our neighbors. That's why that question that bothers so many of us is *What do I have to do to be accepted as a whole person?* Because even if it's made true by God, it's made tangible in the lives of our neighbors.

So let's put this all together. Will faith alone save you? Probably. Will faith alone help you trust that you are accepted as a whole person? Probably. But here's the thing. It won't save your neighbor. Imagine knowing that, as James puts it, "God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom" and not doing anything about it. Imagine being a wealthy

[poor-turns-to-simple-street-solutions-that-underscore-the-citys-complexities/2018/09/03/d6cf321a-ad4d-11e8-8a0c-70b618c98d3c_story.html](https://www.adventlutheranwyckoff.org/poor-turns-to-simple-street-solutions-that-underscore-the-citys-complexities/2018/09/03/d6cf321a-ad4d-11e8-8a0c-70b618c98d3c_story.html)

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person in this congregation James is writing to and not communicating that to the poorer people in your own community. Faith without works isn't dead. It's pitiful.

And that's why using Luther's framing of this text isn't the most helpful. Remember Luther's question, "What must I do to be saved?" What's the problem with that question? The problem isn't just that few of us ask it anymore. The problem is "I." It's that it makes faith and works a private matter that's just between you and God. But James is trying to say that it's not just about you and God. It's about you and God and your neighbor. A better question would be "What must I do so that my neighbor knows they are saved?" Or to put that in our contemporary language, "What must I do so that my neighbor can be accepted as a whole person?"

Because when we make this question all about us, we make it about faith versus works, as if the two are in competition with one another. But when we make it about our neighbor, new possibilities open up. We see that works are what happens when we have faith in God's transforming power. And faith is what God creates in other people when works of compassion flow through our lives. Faith and works aren't two options that we need to choose between. They're what God creates in our lives for the sake of our neighbors. So that we can accept ourselves and one another as the people God created us to be.

So that we can stop trying to justify our worth. So that we can stop trying to justify our identity. So that we can trying to justify our experience. And so that we can justified by grace.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor