

14What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if a person claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save one such as this? 15Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

18But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

19You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20You foolish one, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. 24You see that a person is justified by what is done and not by faith alone.

25In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Let me just be so bold as to declare that Martin Luther was confused. That's right—Martin Luther—famous Protestant reformer, author, and writer of the much beloved *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*—yep, that Martin Luther is the one I think was confused. Me, little old me, Robin Long proud, pugnacious pastor of our petite persevering parish is boldly declaring that this great man and theologian was confused. And about what was the poor fellow confused? Well, I'm glad you asked. Martin Luther was confused, indeed perhaps even wrong, about the Epistle of James.

Our dear brother Martin declares in his writings that James is "a rather strawy epistle" meaning that he thought it was a bunch of bunk. Indeed, he thought that it should be stricken from the canon, taken out of the Bible. His strong feelings about the Epistle of James stem from Luther's firm belief that we are justified by faith, not works, as set out in the writings of the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Galatians, "a person is justified not by the world of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." In other words, we are saved through grace and grace alone and there is nothing we can say or do to save ourselves and "earn" eternal life. Indeed, Luther concludes that mere human beings are simply unable to be and do what is necessary in order to be and do good enough to be saved. And while I agree with him that we are saved—as in we enjoy eternal life in the whatever comes after this life such that while our bodies will die our souls are saved forever—I agree with him that we are that kind of saved by grace but I disagree with his interpretation of the Epistle of James because it seems to me that brother Martin is taking the letter of James too personally and not taking into enough consideration the impact the letter was intended to have on its original audience.

The author of James was writing to a community of believers who, as I mentioned last week, had set the bar pretty low on discipleship, if you recall I suggested that James felt the recipients of the letter were sitting on the premises instead of standing on the promises. But really, we musn't be too hard on those first hearers of this letter because they were likely an infant Christian community—perhaps one of the earliest in existence. They were still working out how to be disciples and how they could fit their lives together into being a faith community. Perhaps that is why, as you may have read in your homework this past week—for those of you who weren't with us copies of the Epistle of James were distributed in the bulletin last week with the hope that folks would take them home and read them—perhaps the infancy of the community explains why the Epistle of James offers such a nice summary of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. And, more specific to our purpose for this morning, offers some very practical advice on how to live as Christians in the world. If James were written today, we might find it in the self-help section after it was re-titled *Christianity for Dummies*.

And perhaps this is why I so appreciate the letter of James. It puts out there—clearly and concisely—how it is that I am supposed to live as a Christian in the world. I am supposed to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. I am to be a doer—not merely a hearer—of the word. I am to bridle my tongue and take care

of orphans and widows and try to remain unstained by the world. I am not to show favoritism and I am to honor the poor. This all makes sense to me. I'm a practical gal who likes practical advice. And James provides plenty of it because he realized that he was writing to a community of people who didn't necessarily know how to act or speak as Christians. He was teaching Christianity 101 and so he had to make it plain and simple and what could be more plain and simple than the statement, the one with which Luther so vehemently disagrees, "faith without works is dead." This makes it clear to the people in the early church—it's not enough to just sit on the premises as they had been, rather they had to get up and stand on the promises. Otherwise, they would die.

And this gets to the point that Luther was trying to make when he declared James to be "a rather strawy epistle." For Luther, and many other reformers, one was not saved through works. One was only saved through the grace and mercy of God. Indeed, that was a major tenet of the reformation. Luther was standing up against the Catholic Church of the day that said a person had to pay money and make confession and attend mass and take communion in order to be saved. The Catholic Church of his day preached the importance of works to such an extent that faith was nearly forgotten. Poor, dear Luther, as a young monk in his cell before he sparked the reformation, stayed awake at night confessing his sin, self-flagellating, doing anything he could to try and save himself. It's no wonder that when he studied and found the holes in the Catholic Church's arguments, he finally, after a lifetime of intense suffering and guilt, he finally felt free. And in the freedom that comes from discovering that we are not responsible for our own salvation, he was jubilant and in his jubilation, he reacted strongly against anything that threatened his new found freedom. And what could threaten that freedom more than the Epistle of James stating that "faith without works is dead." Indeed, Luther had nearly killed himself trying to save himself through works and so of course he would want to save others from a similar fate and want James' words removed from the Bible.

But Martin Luther isn't the community of that early church to which James wrote, the community with which he was sharing his vision of Christianity. These likely weren't people who thought they would actually save themselves through their works. Rather, it seems that they were more likely to be a faith community that was dying, indeed, their faith was dying, because they weren't actually doing anything. Perhaps that old phrase, "use it or lose it" fits here. Because I don't know about you but the thing that most feeds my faith, the thing that most stimulates me in my journey of Christian discipleship, is when I try to do the things Jesus did. When we took in a homeless family, when I questioned a corrupt politician, when I said a racist joke wasn't funny even while everyone else was laughing, when I went on the mission trip to New Orleans, when I got out of bed this morning to come and worship God—these are the moments in which my faith was and is most alive. Without these opportunities to serve and love, without the chance to do these works—it would feel like my faith was dying. Surely none of us actually think we are saving our eternal souls when we commit acts of justice, kindness, and mercy—but we certainly know that we are saving ourselves from listlessness, irrelevance, and depression when we do and give as Jesus did and gave. And I think this is what James is really trying to say. We justify our existence in this life, not in the next, but in this life we justify our existence, justify the space we take up, the air we breathe in, justify our place in this life when we do works of faith. None of us really wants to just take up space, sitting on the premises—thinking that since God has already saved us we might as well just live it up because what have we got to lose. No, we don't just want to sit around taking up space, we want to do something, we want to get up and stand on the promises—we have a vision of living life with gusto and faith, doing the hard work of Christian discipleship, not because we must, but because we may. Because we know that while faith without works is not *actually* dead, it sure does feel that way.