

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, September 8, 2024

I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious and Holy God, you have called us out of our places to be here together in this place. You have called us to be your people. You move in our hearts and minds to this moment. Let us feel your presence as you have promised that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts might be acceptable in your sight, Holy One. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from the Epistle of James, and it is—I'm going to be honest—not something I think I have read in worship before; but today we begin with the second chapter of the Epistle of James, starting with the first 10 verses, before jumping to verse 14-17. I invite us to hear these words of wisdom from the early church.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there or sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved sisters and brothers, has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the Kingdom that God has promised to those who love the Lord? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture—you shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors, for whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. What good is it, my sisters and brothers, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily need, what is the good of that? So faith by itself if it has no works is dead.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

It might be a little clearer why I've not read James, Chapter 2 in worship, after we have shared it together, but it is an important part of our Canon. A little background for us if we're not familiar with it. The Epistle of James is one of the disputed books in our New Testament, meaning that its authorship is questionable. It is pseudo graphia, meaning the book claims to be written by James, the brother of Jesus, but scholars are nearly uniformly certain that Jesus's brother did not write this letter. Now it was very common in ancient times to ascribe the writing of a letter or of a book to someone famous, someone with authority, because then it would lend that writing some measure of power, some measure of consideration. The Epistle of James is one of the very last bits of literature that was included in the canonization process in our Bible; and throughout it, and it's a short letter—we've broken it up into six chapters—it focuses on the interactions and inequalities present in early church communities. It focuses on how the earliest of Christians are to live daily, consistently in what they have learned and experienced in Jesus

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Christ. The way our children told the story this morning is exactly the way the writer of James tells it. To point out when—to the gathered people who were hearing this letter—to us today when we have failed to meet Jesus's requirements. To paraphrase Jesus, the writer of James is saying that if you cannot care for the least of these among us you have no faith.

So how do we hold this passage in tension with the fundamental reformed belief of sola fide, that we are saved by grace through faith? How do we hold James's bold statement "Faith without works is dead" in tension with Paul, who declares in Ephesians, "For by Grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the work of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Simply put, we gather to remember that Paul and James had different audiences. They were writing with different issues. In their letters, in the many letters Paul wrote and in this letter of James, neither one is trying to articulate a full, comprehensive, systemic theology. They are writing letters to different communities at different times in different places with different concerns, and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit that led our forebears to choose to include both of these voices in our final canon might serve to all of us as a reminder that faith and works are hand in hand, that we should hold them not in tension, but as complementary. James, in the passage we shared today is not arguing that works of our faith save us. James is saying that faith that does not produce visible fruit is empty words. It is dead faith. Our works do not provide our salvation. They do not save us, but faith alone does not give us a pass from doing the difficult things God has called us to do. I often wonder that we modern Christians, especially those of us who proudly claim our Reformed heritage, have broadened that gap between faith and works into a chasm that neither Paul nor Luther nor Calvin imagined. We use it to distinguish ourselves from others. We are saved this way. They believe they are saved this way. It is a chasm that is echoed in our modern framing of head and heart, of thinking and feeling, because throughout the Gospels and our Hebrew scriptures we see examples of how head and heart were deeply intertwined. Faith is spoken about as something that involves our very selves, but we, especially in the Western world, especially the heirs of the Enlightenment, we have internalized the teaching that rationality is the only way to move forward, to the point that we no longer trust our heart or our bodies. We prioritize the intellectualization of things to the detriment of our whole being. We worry quite a bit about what we believe, what we consent to intellectually, and we spend a lot less time worrying about what we do. Marcus Borg in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, which ended up being a foundational text for my adult faith, says this when talking about that duality:

"That Christian faith is about belief is a rather odd notion, when you think about it. It suggests that what God really cares about is the beliefs in our heads— as if "believing the right things" is what God is most looking for, as if having "correct beliefs" is what will save us. And if you have "incorrect beliefs," you may be in trouble. It's remarkable to think that God cares so much about "beliefs." Moreover, when you think about it, faith as belief is relatively impotent, relatively powerless. You can believe all the right things and still be in bondage. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable. You can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power."

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What Marcus Borg and the writer of the Epistle of James are saying to us is that we cannot just think the right things without applying them into the world. Our firmly held belief in a loving and gracious God transforms us and leads us to transformative action in the world. What we do and what we say each day matters...matters out in the world probably more than it matters in here, because what we do and say out there in ways large and small, what we don't do as well bears witness to the vision of Christ we claim to serve. And when our words don't match our actions, we bear little resemblance to the body of Christ. When we turn a blind eye to oppression, when we choose to remain quiet in the face of hatred in order to maintain an empty sense of civility, when we tell the cold and the hungry to go in peace and eat your fill, we violate the image of God in them and the image of God in ourselves. Our reading from James this morning is declaring to us that the systems of the world, systems of power and division and oppression cannot be the same systems that rule the Church. We cannot declare with our mouths that the powers of the world are empty and then let those powers shape the choices we make every day. Our passage from James today is calling us to task that the version of Christianity that Western Europeans exported to Asia, to Africa, to the Americas—a version of Christianity made more in our image than in the image of God, a version of Christianity that expresses our cultural mores and attitudes, a version that declares that in order to be faithful to the Triune God you need to behave and speak and dress and experience God in the cultural ways that we determine—that version of Christianity is bankrupt.

Continuing in The Heart of Christianity Marcus Borg says this:

“The Christian Life is a life of relationship and transformation. Being Christian is not about meeting requirements or a future reward in the afterlife, and it's not very much about believing. Rather, the Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms life in the present, transforms our lives and the life of others.”

This statement, this belief in understanding what it means to be God's people is one of the reasons that I love baptisms so much, because when we gather around that font when we are taking our call to be community seriously, we take vows to nurture and encourage and love and raise children, children that are not ours individually but become ours collectively. And just as we took those vows for Betsy, we are taking them for various other children in the same way that two different congregations took baptismal vows for my two daughters, and three other congregations have spent the last 16 years living those vows out—vows that they never made with their own mouth. This mirrors this idea of being God's people. When we take our call to community seriously, those children become our children, which means that when it happens to children in Rafa or in Winder or in Orange Mound, it is happening to our children. What happens to God's people is happening to all of us. Does that change how we respond when we think about our children, our grandparents, our families on the margins of the world? Wherever there is pain God's heart breaks, and so should ours. And the Epistle of James is telling us that beyond our hearts breaking, we should be moved into action, not allowing the voices and powers of the world to prevent us to keep us comfortable in the status quo. It is imperfect and it is difficult. As Courtney shared when we came into our confession sequence, we take vows and sometimes we break them, but we return again and again to a God who welcomes us, who nurtures and teaches

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and loves us, and then sends us to do that for the world—a God that never abandons us on the journey.

This summer we spent 11 weeks in worship working through our Theology 101 sermon series ending with the sermon David preached on what it means to be Reformed. And in that service he and the scripture called us to task about understanding our pride in saying we are Reformed and always being Reformed according to the word of God. He pointed out in that sermon that too often we leave that second phrase hanging, but we are Reformed and always being Reformed by the word of God. The word of God, Jesus Christ, Wisdom Incarnate should be the final measure of how we are to act in the world. And what do we know about Jesus? Friends, the Jesus that never once accepted the status quo, Jesus who overturned cultural, social, and religious structures, Jesus who broadened the table rather than making higher fences. The Jesus who broke down barriers, who welcomed the outcast, who engaged those on the margins showed us how we are supposed to be in the world. St. Teresa of Avila shares this thought clearly in her poem Christ Has No Body But Yours, and I believe the writer of the Epistle of James would agree.

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which Christ blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Let us carry that Christlike into our world with our hands and our feet and our eyes and our hearts this day and every day. Amen.