

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of September 6, 2009

He Has Done All Things Well (James 2:17-18)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text is from the:

“Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. but someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

This is the text.

Dear friends in Jesus, who likes a good debate? Debates can be very interesting; they can be entertaining too. The debates last year in the presidential election in the United States were some of the most watched shows on TV. They were big news as Barack Obama and John McCain debated things such as the economy, health care reform, and the military.

Public debates like those are usually on important issues that affect the general public. In our text today in James there has been a lot of debate on the issue mentioned there too. The things that James is talking about affect all people, whether they realize it or not. They affect salvation, a real matter of life and death. He speaks about the relationship between faith and good works.

These two things are both very good things and yet there is debate about how we should understand them. Good works are obviously good; they help our neighbour, they glorify God, and they are good for the soul. Faith is also a very good thing; faith in God gives a relationship with Him; it gives assurance that He is our refuge and strength, it gives us salvation in Jesus Christ.

So what is the controversy? This relationship between faith and good works is something that has been hotly disputed through the history of the church. Like the presidential debates, back in Martin Luther's day in the 1500s public debates were also tremendously popular. Only instead of debating things like the economy and health care they debated theology. Many people back then saw theology, which means the ‘study of God’ as affecting their lives. And during the Reformation Luther wrote and preached about the subject matter of the Scripture reading today; the relationship between faith and good works.

Luther said that faith is the “Ring that Holds the Jewel of Great Price”. In other words, faith holds on to Christ just like a ring holds on to a jewel. And the crown jewel is Jesus. He said that through faith we receive Christ and the forgiveness of sins along with salvation and eternal life. And so we are saved by grace through faith alone apart from works. For we can't add anything to the redeeming finished work of Christ. This

teaching was the heart and centre of the Reformation. And this was the teaching of the early church that had become muddled along the way in the Middle Ages.

Friends, faith comes when we hear the message of Jesus. Some people believe and some people do not believe but for those who believe their faith is living and active. Faith grabs hold of Christ and He comes to live in us. And so when James says, "Faith without works is dead" he means that if we say we have faith but do no good works as a result of that faith then that faith is essentially dead. It would be like a body that doesn't breathe.

In a church like ours that stresses salvation through faith in Christ alone, it is easy to slip into the notion that, since good works do not save us, we do not need to be concerned about doing them. That is when faith is reduced to nothing but intellectual assent to certain doctrines. And that is not saving faith. Essentially, saving faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ where we trust Him for forgiveness and look to Him to lead us to walk in His ways. Faith connects us to the Person of Jesus in a very real way.

Luther once said that faith is "a living, active, energetic, mighty thing". And faith is living, active, and mighty because of the One it connects us to. Jesus lives; He has risen; He is almighty and He is active in showing God's love to this world even to this day. As Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." When we have Jesus He is bound to do good things through us.

When James says, "Faith without works is dead" he does not mean that we somehow contribute to our salvation and earn God's favour by doing enough good things. If this were the case then Jesus died on the cross for nothing. What James is talking about here is signs of faith. If we take a road trip somewhere we normally look for signs to show that we are going in the right direction. The signs give us confirmation that we are on the right road. Good works are like the vital signs of spiritual life. If we are alive in Christ then we will have a spiritual pulse and we will strive to do good things and emulate Jesus. How are your vital signs? Is our spiritual pulse strong and vibrant or do we need cardiac resuscitation?

Luther once said, "We are saved by faith alone but faith is never alone." In other words, if we have faith in Jesus then good deeds are bound to follow. We will begin to let go of any bitterness or resentment and pray for those who do us wrong. When faith is alive in us we begin to love others in gratitude for all that Christ has done for us. As the apostle John wrote in his first epistle, "We love because he first loved us." And as St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

Friends, we cannot put the cart before the horse. Good works in God's sight always follow faith. They are the fruits of faith; they are the fruits of the Spirit; they are the fruits of repentance. These are synonymous terms. It says in Hebrews 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please God" and so a good work in God's eyes is everything that we do, everything that we speak, everything that we think in faith and according to the Ten Commandments. Non-Christians do all kinds of good things in they eyes of the world. Many people give to charity; many are upstanding citizens, hard workers and good

parents, and so on... But without faith in Christ and doing these things for the glory of God, in God's eyes they are not considered good works.

The conclusion that James reaches is most pointed – “Faith without works is dead”. Does that conclusion frighten you? It can, especially if we start asking question like, how many good works does it take? Am I really in the faith?

Have we done enough to be saved? - No, of course not. No amount of good works can earn us a place in the heavenly kingdom. Our sin disqualifies us. Rather, we come to the One who has done enough. The people who saw Jesus perform His miracles in the Gospel reading said it wonderfully, “He has done all things well” (Mark 7:37). Jesus is our substitute! He came to earth to live a perfect life for us; He came to love others completely and perfectly in our place; He came also, ultimately to give His life as a ransom for sin.

Friends, Jesus is full of good works. He is holy and just; He is righteous and blameless; and He is full of compassion. The crowds were impressed at His powerful teaching and His miracles but most did not realize who it was in their midst. Jesus is the Lord; He is the Beginning and the End and He is God Himself in the flesh. In their midst was the Author of Life itself who would lay down His life to redeem the world. To say He has done all things well is almost a bit of an understatement. He has done all things perfectly and continues to work through His church today.

He moves us because through faith in Christ alone we are members of His body and He holds us together and builds us up with His Word and Sacraments. As His hands and feet and mouthpiece in the world He wants to use us to spread the Gospel, to glorify God, and to help our neighbours in need.

Tomorrow is Labour Day. It's a long weekend but the holiday is to celebrate the achievements that workers have made over the years to ensure their social and economic rights. And we can take this time to think of the One who has laboured so perfectly, who by His grace gives us the ultimate right to be called children of God. For Jesus is the ultimate Labourer and He calls us, each of us to walk with Him in His work. The work of the Lord is not always easy but it gives ultimate meaning to our life. As St. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Friends, we have work to do. Our work together as a church is to bring the Gospel to the lost and to do this we must keep in mind that it can't happen on our own steam. It happens through faith in Christ who is with us always. If we believe then Christ is alive in us and His life will show through us, not because we force it but because of God's grace we can't stop it. It is simply who we are in Christ. May His glorious and wonderful life of love overflow into all that we do now and always. Amen. Go in peace. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.