

8/15/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

OPPORTUNITIES – PASTOR LOIS

I'd like to introduce my friend, Charles Carney. Charles and I went to church together in Wichita at the Mennonite Church of the Servant many years ago where we were both involved in peacemaking efforts in the city and more broadly. I was pleasantly surprised to get an email from Charles this last week letting me know he's doing a Peace Walk and he was planning to walk past AMC this morning and wondered whether he could worship with us and share just a bit about what he's doing. Welcome Charles!

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

I will include Jenny Fast's parents, Walt and Carol Friesen in our prayer. They live at Schowalter Villa and both have, unfortunately, tested positive for the covid virus. These are "breakthrough" cases as they are also both fully vaccinated, so hopefully that will make their cases less severe. But Walt has been in the hospital in Newton this last week and Carol is confined to her room.

We come to you, God, acknowledging that you are the One who created us and who loves us. You sent Jesus to live and walk among us, to show us the most perfect reflection of who you are and to show how we can also live in ways that honor and show your love. And we also acknowledge, God, that we so often come up short – way short, of making choices that honor you and show your sacrificial love. We want to fully be your people – to believe in our hearts and minds that your grace is sufficient and also to live out that faith in ways that are gentle and meaningful. Open us to the message that Pastor Caleb has for us, given through the words of James. Give us new insights and understandings this morning – new ways of thinking that translate to different possibilities for how we live and make decisions.

And in the midst of our learning, we continue to trust you and to bring the prayers of our hearts to you. O God, we pray for Robyn, Ethan, Riley and Aida as they grieve their losses. Give them resilience, hope and strength as they rebuild – their home and their lives. Be with their extended families as well as they grieve with them and support them along the way. We pray also for Marlo and Lynette as the destruction of fire has also affected them. Be with them as they consider options and decisions.

God of compassion and healing, we pray for those who are sick and in pain. We pray for Rannie and Meribeth. Oh, Lord, grant your wisdom, send your Spirit of comfort. Let Rannie and Meribeth feel your love and care upholding them and let them rest into their trust in you. Be also with Cindy and Russ as they seek wisdom and ways to support their parents. We pray for Jenny's folks, Walt and Carol Friesen as they struggle to regain health. Be with them in their recovery and give them hope and strength. Be with the staff at Schowalter, at Bethesda, at Kidron-Bethel, at the many facilities where difficult decisions will again likely need to be made to maintain health and well-being. We pray, oh Lord, for students, teachers and everyone who is returning to school – from the youngest children to those going to college and voluntary service assignments beginning. Again we pray for wisdom, for endurance and forbearance as we work together to care for one another in the midst of this on-going pandemic.

God, we lift up to you our concerns that go beyond our church and community – the pain and suffering that we see in your world around us. We grieve the destruction of our planet and we confess that we humans, collectively, have not cared for your earth as you intended.

Soften the hearts of all who are in positions to make decisions that will heal the earth, repair the damage and restore the health of our ecosystems. We pray for the people who are experiencing the most dire consequences of climate change – those suffering severe drought and famine, fire and flooding, extreme conditions with few resources.

God, we also bring to you our joy and gratitude. We thank you for Charles, for his life-long commitment to his faith in you and the ways he has taken actions that show that commitment. Bless him as he walks for peace. Grant him safety and courage as he shows and shares your love. Thank you for Travis and Erica – for the joy that they find in one another and for their plans to be married. Thank you for their love and commitment first to you and to each other. Bless them as they plan and build this new life together.

Be with us now, God, as we continue in this time of worship. Bless each one who is participating, in person and on-line. Grant to each one what is needed, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

OFFERING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Giver of all life, of all good gifts, of all that we are, we thank you. We praise you. We ask you to bless these gifts that have been offered back to you as the first-fruits of what you have given to us. Grant us joy in the giving. Receive our gifts of money, time, energy and living. Help us to live humbly, fully as your people. Amen.

FAITH AND WORKS – PASTOR CALEB

James 2:14-26

INTRODUCTION

The passage Ben just read is probably the section of James that has gotten the most attention over time.

James boldly shows that faith and “works” – which is a fancy way of saying action – are inseparable.

JAMES AND PAUL

Many readers of the Bible have compared James with the words of Paul the apostle in Romans or Galatians. James and Paul use some of the same words:

Faith, works, justified, law.

But they seem to be saying different things.

Take these two verses, for instance:

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24).

“Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16).

It certainly seems like there’s a contradiction there. The reformer Martin Luther thought there was, and sided with Paul.

Other church leaders throughout the centuries have understood James and Paul to be addressing different issues. The “works of the law” Paul is concerned with are ritual aspects of Jewish Torah that should not be expected of new Gentile believers.

My parents tell the story of one theological disagreement they worked through when they were dating. My dad grew up Mennonite, while my mom’s family attended a non-denominational evangelical church.

The understanding in my dad’s church was that it is possible to fall away from your faith, while at my mom’s church they taught very deliberately that once you are saved, you are always saved, assuming it was an authentic conversion experience.

So, they talked this over between the two of them. As they tell the story, they found that they seemed to often be on the same page, but getting there a different way, and using different words.

Their word picture for this was being on two different sides of a fence but still close enough to be holding hands across the fence (I’m sure they were doing plenty of handholding those days regardless).

Let’s come back to comparing James and Paul. They are **not so different** after all.

Paul says in Galatians 5:6 that “the only thing that counts is *faith working through love.*” The NIV has “faith expressing itself in love.”

Love is all that James is asking for: “you do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (James 2:8).

Paul too couldn’t have thought that faith and action were inseparable, because we cannot love in the abstract. We love in action.

At the same time, there *is* still a difference between James and Paul, just like there are differences between the four gospels. The Bible contains vigorous, back-and-forth conversation, and we understand the Bible best when we take in all of its primary voices.

We need Paul and we need James. Ignoring James has led many Christians to misunderstand Paul.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German church leader who ultimately was killed for resisting Hitler, called this “**cheap grace.**” Cheap grace is grace as a doctrine, an idea that the Christian gives intellectual assent to, and then go on with life.

Describing cheap grace he says, “Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world’s standards in every sphere of life, and not

presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin. That was the heresy of the enthusiasts, the Anabaptists and their kind.”

He goes on to contrast cheap grace with costly grace. Costly grace is like the treasure hidden in the field or the pearl of great price that Jesus described in parables.

“Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”¹ (and women too, of course)

Mennonites sometimes forget grace. This has led to painful excommunications and schisms in our history. In our personal lives, it leads to a fierce independence. A need to keep up appearances and reluctance to receive help.

Costly grace certainly doesn’t mean that any of us earn or merit God’s approval or special accolades. Costly grace is still grace.

DELVING INTO THE PASSAGE

Let’s take a closer look at the passage from James 2. Last week, I noted that the first chapter of James functions as a kind of teaser for all of the major themes of the book.

Toward the end of the chapter, James calls his listeners to not merely “hear the word” – register with your ears the words of the scriptures or good news. You have to be a “doer of the word.” You have to follow through on what you heard.

Now, in chapter 2, James is developing this teaching further. The basic idea is that authentic faith is expressed in our action. James says, “What good is it if you have faith but do not have works?”

What good is it if you meet someone with no clothes or food and just wish them well without attending to their physical needs?

Then James imagines a little debate. His debate partner says, “you have faith and I have works.” The partner seems to take James’ position, but not really. The point is not that works or action is better than faith. The point is that faith and action are inseparable. If action is the glove, then faith is the hand.

James notes that even demonic forces that oppose God can still *believe* that “God is one.” If faith is only intellectual assent to an idea, such faith is useless.

“Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?” (2:20). There is a play on words in this verse that I tried to capture in two different ways:

“Faith without works *doesn’t work*.”

¹ Bonhoeffer Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. London: SCM Press, 2015, p 4

“Faith without action is *inaction*.”

James gives two examples of “faith and actions working together” or “faith made complete by works” (2:22). These are very interesting. They aren’t examples of pious moral rectitude like you might expect.

The first of these is **Abraham**. Abraham is convinced God is asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Not only would this be the loss of a child, it is sabotaging the very promise that God had given him. Whatever our concerns about the disturbing nature of this story, it is the ultimate test of faith.

So Abraham does what makes no sense by the logic of the world. He follows through until God stops him. His action proves the substance of his faith.

Likewise, Rahab of Jericho showed hospitality to foreign Israelite spies, and saved their lives by helping them escape the city. She essentially committed an act of treason against her own people by helping them, because she believed the god of these Israelites was the **true God**. Again, an act that makes no conventional sense because it is an act of faith.

These examples are unique and not replicable. Our action should always be motivated by the love that is most fully revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus, yet the Biblical story shows that God uses even flawed action that is authentic expression of faith.

Once again, we come back to the grace of God, which is never an excuse for inaction, but rather the impetus to risk doing the best we know how to do, knowing it will be imperfect and flawed, and we will have to keep learning, keep trying, even at times changing course.

DIMENSIONS OF ACTION

How do we think about action that expresses faith? What kind of actions are we talking about? It may be helpful to think about two primary dimensions of acting.

There is a personal or “near” dimension. How we love those close to us – spouse, children, family, friends. How we embody love and the way of Jesus in the life of the local congregation and extend that love into the local community. In this “near” dimension, we are willing to sacrifice money or precious time out of our busy schedules to help neighbors in need.

This core dimension is essential. We have no spiritual wherewithal to work in the second dimension if we do not have a consistency of faith and life in the “near” dimension.

Often we show love to a neighbor, friend, or family by simply showing up. We might think that in Christian discipleship, what we do for close friends or family “doesn’t count.” Yes, Jesus did say, if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? But

Jesus also said being faithful in small matters is a sign that we will be faithful in large matters.

Our love can never be any greater than how we treat those closest to us.

The second dimension, which I have as a bigger circle has to do with concerns that are “farther.” It includes spiritual connection to the broader global church; working for justice and peace in the world; resisting systemic injustice or evils. These are problems or evils that are much bigger than the sin of any one person.

I included the phrase “Christ-like way of life,” because all of the big systemic issues really have to do with our way of life. We give witness to a different way when we let Jesus be our example, Jesus who ministered to the marginalized and became poor.

What are examples of what I mean by “systems?” One of these is our highly consumptive way of life that is leading to climate change.

On Monday of this past week, some of you may have seen that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report synthesizing thousands of scientific studies on climate change, and the news is very stark. There are already permanent changes to the global climate system that we can’t undo. There are still a number of possible scenarios for the future, most pretty dark.

Humanity has to make unprecedently rapid change or by the time my children are elderly, the world will be unrecognizable.

Part of our traditional Anabaptist values is living simply, though we do not always practice this the way we preach it. Living simply and making choices that reduce our consumption of resources are important ways to communicate love for God’s creation and give witness to the hope of God’s new creation.

The pandemic is another big systemic concern that feels out of our control. Yet we can all reasonable action to protect the most vulnerable – immunocompromised people and children.

When it comes to dismantling racism, poverty, or war, there are likewise actions we can take. We can educate ourselves, form new relationships, challenge our culture.

But because these are bigger-than-us problems, we can run into despair that we may see little evidence of being effective. In all these examples, we are caught up in major problems or evils much bigger than we are, and, if we have eyes to see, we participate or at least are complicit in these evils.

Kris Schmucker’s report on the Land Acknowledgement seminar at Assembly contained a quote from Nikki Sanchez that stuck with me: *“This history is not your fault, but it is*

absolutely your responsibility.” To expand the application of the quote, we have to take responsibility for what feels impossible. We have to be like Abraham or Rahab, who took actions that made no sense.

We have to be like Jeremiah who bought a field, while the Babylonian are at the doorstep, ready to march the people off into exile. Just before an exile is very poor timing for investing in real estate. Jeremiah was sending a message expressing his faith.

On the bigger problems and evils that feel beyond our control, we are called to acts of faith that God can yet change hearts (including our own) in order to transform systemic evils.

REFLECTION

We might ask, is faith in Jesus necessary or even relevant to making an impact for justice and human flourishing in our world? Certainly, we can't pretend like Christians have a monopoly on love, or deny the long history of injustice, oppression, and hypocrisy of Christians.

Often, we are tempted to take action to feel good about ourselves, rather than a true sensitivity to what is needed. Sustainable loving action has to be spiritually grounded. We cannot take action truly motivated by love unless that action is rooted in a real experience of the love of grace of God.

For those of us who claim to follow Jesus, Jesus is our inspiration, our wisdom, our source of renewal, and our accountability.

Sometimes that means confronting our powerlessness to our limitations, as well as confronting with clear vision our own complicity and participation in the human predicament.

APPLICATION

I would like to call each of us as a community to our own reflection around several questions. You can do this in your thoughts, in your prayer life, or if you have a practice like journaling. The slide with questions will be available later on the website.

Evaluate what you do in your daily life or over the course of a year. You already do a lot of things. *How is your life already an expression of your faith? How is it not? What choices are in your power to make this more consistent?*

Next, *which do you need more? A sense of God's grace, or motivation to act?*

Do you feel the weight of shame or a sense of inadequacy perhaps from past wounds? If so, be careful not to add to that shame by piling on more “shoulds.” Rather than more stuff to do, you may need a space to experience God's forgiveness and grace. Listen for what kind of action energizes you or stirs your heart. That listening to your inner self is

important, as filling our lives with activity that we feel we are “supposed to do” burns us out.

Or you may be in the second category – you are caught up in busyness or mostly live for yourself. Your faith may be largely intellectual assent to an idea, rather than a way of life and a deep love that commands your whole heart and soul. (If you remember last week, I mentioned the importance of being undivided, single-minded, “all in.”)

You may need to examine your priorities, so that where you put your time and energy is reflecting the faith in Jesus that you profess.

Finally, *what are the nudges that you feel in your inner being that just might be from the Spirit?* That requires listening and silence, and that takes time. We are often too busy. You can easily talk yourself out of it, but if you have a nudge that you are putting off or ignoring, you know what it is.

James teaches that faith and action are inseparable. Faith cannot be reduced to the ideas in our brains. It must be felt in our hearts and expressed in action in our daily lives. It is all a seamless whole.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION – VT 890

- I want to close this time much differently than usual, with a corporate prayer of confession and forgiveness.
- We see again that there is no contradiction between living out of the grace of God and having a faith that expresses itself in loving action.
- This prayer is found in the hymnal -- #890.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and one another.

Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

God, who is rich in mercy,
loved us even when we were dead in sin,
and made us **alive** together with Christ.

By **grace** we have been saved.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our sins are **forgiven**.

Almighty God,
strengthen us with power through the Holy Spirit,
that Christ may live in our hearts through faith. Amen

BENEDICTION

Modified from VT 1058, by Ruth Fox, OSB

May God bless you with **discomfort** at easy answers, so that you may seek **truth** boldly with love.

May God bless you with holy **anger** at injustice,
so that you may **work** tirelessly for **justice**, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with **tears** to shed with all who suffer, so that you may transform **pain** into **joy**.

May God bless you with enough **foolishness** to believe you can really make a **difference** in this world,
so that with God's grace you might do **what others claim** cannot be done.