

“Living Faith”  
September 10, 2006

Psalm 146  
Mark 7:24-37  
James 2:1-7, 14-17

“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Pretty blunt, isn't it? James doesn't pull any punches. Faith without works is “dead.” Not “limited,” “ineffectual,” “unwise,” or even “not worth much.” Faith without works simply has no life in it.

Now, for those of us who grew up in a family or a culture in which communication was rarely, if ever, this direct, this sort of bluntness can be startling ... and, really, quite invigorating. It's certainly light years away from the proper ways of speaking I learned from Southern culture, a culture that has turned indirectness into an art form. Just to give you an idea of what I'm talking about, let me share this exchange from a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party.

The birthday honoree opened a present and said, “Oh, Flavia, thank you. What a beautiful present! Was there anything you had in mind when you chose it?” [To translate into plain, direct English: “Flavia, what in the world *is* this?”]

Flavia then replied, “Why, Mary, the only thing I had in mind was a beautiful gift for a beautiful lady.” [Translation: Mary, honey, I have no idea!]

There is a certain creativity – and a certain gentleness – that goes into this less-than-direct method of communicating, but I confess I feel more drawn to James' bluntness than I am to the Southern dance of indirectness. His bluntness points us toward a clear understanding of faith. In no uncertain terms and in short order, James tells us that faith without works is lifeless and empty. This clarity is helpful, but it still leaves us with some very important, blunt questions of our own: “What does it mean to have a *living* faith? What does faith *with* works look like? How do we *know*, how do we *choose*, the works that will give our faith life and breath?”

It takes very little effort to realize that the possibilities for faithful works are endless. Pick up a newspaper, get on the internet, watch TV, or look deeply into the eyes of the neighbor next to you in the pew, on the street, in the store, or in the airport. Do any of those things, and you will see the human face of the needs that Jesus calls his disciples to try to meet: to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. If we are willing to look and willing to have our hearts broken, we will see thousands upon thousands of children orphaned by AIDS, by war, by alcoholism and drug addiction, by domestic violence. We will see countless of our brothers and sisters who do not have enough food to eat and clean water to drink. We will see hatred, intolerance, and ridicule. We will see the beauty and glory of this earth threatened by waste, greed, and indifference. We will see friends and strangers who are lost, lonely, and in need of love and genuine community.

There is clearly no shortage of works we can pour our faith into. Instead, the need for faithful, loving works is so overwhelming that it can paralyze us, leaving us convinced that the world's needs are too big for us to make a difference or leaving us simply confused about where to start. So I think we're justified in wanting to sit down with our brother James and ask him, bluntly, "Just exactly what works will make our faith a living faith? How are we supposed to know? How do we figure that out?"

Over the last week, with these questions nagging at me, the words of theologian and civil rights activist Howard Thurman kept coming to mind. "Ask not what the world needs," he said. "Ask what makes you come alive ... and then go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." What the world needs is people who have come alive. I find his words compelling, but they also make me a bit uneasy. In a culture like ours, in which nearly every aspect of human life has been turned into a commodity, to be marketed, bought, and sold for a profit, Thurman's words can sound like an ad campaign. I can hear it now: the world needs people like you to come alive, so indulge yourself. Buy the latest technology, the sleekest car, the most luxurious house, or even, my friends, the best wine. You will come alive ... and save the world to boot.

But Thurman wasn't talking about indulging or entertaining ourselves into life. He was talking about becoming fully alive. His faith in a God of justice and transforming love was so deep that he believed that when we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and discover and embrace the unique passion for life that we have each received, we will give a broken and violent world some of the healing and peace that it needs.

What the world needs is people who have come alive. Some of you may find Thurman's vision too simplistic, too Pollyanna, maybe even too hopeful. I certainly had my doubts about his vision when I first encountered it. But when I came to know more about Thurman's life, I realized that his vision of a full life and a living faith was thoroughly grounded in his experience of God *and* his experience of human brokenness and sin. You see, Howard Thurman was the grandson of a slave and was born in the South in the year 1900. He lived through the heights of Jim Crow segregation and humiliation and the depths of public lynching as racialized terror. He knew the limits of human compassion, empathy, wisdom, and love, and he knew those limits probably far better than many of us do. And he also knew, because he had seen it over and over again, that the people who embraced segregation and mob violence and the people who tolerated it were no longer alive. He knew the truth that faith without works is dead, that life closed to God's passionate spirit of life is no life at all.

But all this takes me back to my earlier questions. What does a faith *with* works look like? What does it look like when any one of us comes alive in a world of such deep need? For the answer, I think we can start right here, in this sanctuary and in this congregation. We can look and listen, as we did last week, to Jim and Bev and Rick and Jaime, and encounter people who have embraced the sacred passions God has given them and who have let those passions guide them in their work, their relationships, and their vocations. We can look and listen, as we have this summer, as Jo Anne and Brian and Pattie and John and Margie and so many others have embraced the sacred gift of music and have called us to come alive in its beauty just as they have. We can look and see as so many members of this congregation come alive in nurturing their talents and sacred sparks and then in offering them to the church, to the community, and to the world.

Yesterday morning in Burlingame Hall, Jerry Mize urged those who had gathered there to look around and see the gifts and talents that fill this congregation. I urge you to do the same *this* morning and then begin to imagine a world transformed by living faith. If we look closely, we will discover that our gifts and talents are endless, because their source is a God whose creative love is endless. We will discover that those gifts and talents can give the world what it needs, because their source is a God who longs for us to come alive by sharing them fully.

But in the midst of Howard Thurman's vision of people who have come alive and James' call to live our faith with word *and* deed, the story of Jesus and the Gentile woman that Janet read several minutes ago strikes a cautionary note. For anyone who thinks of Jesus as the kind, gentle shepherd, as God's love incarnate, this story as it appears in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew can be jarring – and deeply disturbing.

The story is short, but not sweet. A woman approaches Jesus because her daughter is in need of healing. In the gospels, this woman is nameless. And although we never learn her name, we do learn that she is an outsider. In Mark, she is a Gentile; in Matthew, a Canaanite. As either Gentile or Canaanite, she is someone Jesus and his followers have been taught to despise and avoid. These cultural prejudices and divisions are so strong that this woman undoubtedly knows that she is risking insult and rejection when she asks Jesus for help. And it is insult and rejection that Jesus gives her. Comparing her and her people to dogs, Jesus makes it clear that his focus is on his own people, not on outsiders like her. But then a remarkable thing happens; this nameless woman who has dared to approach Jesus stands up to him. She doesn't insult him in return, but she does tell him that even dogs deserve better treatment than he has given her. Jesus then relents, and her child is healed.

There are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of ways this story has been interpreted in the last nearly 2000 years. I can't give you the definitive interpretation, because there is no such thing. But what I can offer is what I discover in this story at this moment in my life and in our life together. What I encounter in this brief conversation between a Gentile woman and Jesus is a reminder of how deeply we need each other. Here in this story, someone else holds a mirror up to Jesus, and it is only then that he realizes that he has closed his heart and embraced a faith of limited works. On his own, Jesus is willing to dismiss the needs of this woman and her daughter, but she won't let him get away so easily. She stakes her claim on him and helps him see that he is called to share himself beyond the usual cultural and racial boundaries.

As the Gospels portray him, Jesus was a miracle worker, a man of great compassion, courage, and faithfulness. He was Lord, the Son of Man, the Word of God. But the Gospels also tell us that he could insult and reject someone who came to him for help – until she challenged him to be true to his faith, until she called him to come alive with a living faith.

My beloved sisters and brothers, we need help no less than Jesus did. And so we come together in community, offering what we have learned of a life of faith and hope, helping one another become filled with the life that God is offering us, and always calling one another to a living faith that grows past its previous limits.

We are blessed with one another's love and companionship. Let us all remain open to one another's gifts and talents. And let us always be willing to receive the reassurance *and* challenge we can offer one another, for God comes to us and blesses us in both.

Amen.

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