

“Faith without Works”
September 5, 2021
Scripture: James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

A few years ago North hosted Presbytery Day where the keynote speaker was a minister named Carol Howard Merritt. I don’t remember a lot about that event, but one thing she said has stuck with me. She said our churches, meaning Presbyterian but I think other similar congregations, mostly white, middle-class and suburban, expect folks who come to us to be fully formed. By that she meant we want people to have their lives settled, whether it’s their careers or families, before we fully welcome them into the life of the church.

Now that’s a pretty harsh indictment of the culture in many of our congregations, but I think it’s fairly accurate. We aren’t comfortable with folks who are still trying to figure out their path. We don’t provide a lot of venues for folks to be involved if they don’t keep traditional work hours or aren’t in stable relationships. We may not treat them the way James describes the treatment of poor people that he’s apparently seen in some of the churches, but we don’t seem to know what to do with folks who come to us when they’re still searching.

And the most frustrating part of that is we often have no idea we’re doing anything wrong. What James describes in his letter of the distinctions being made between rich and poor people entering the assembly was probably very common everywhere in that society. It was a natural response to treat wealthy people with honor and poor people with disdain. We can find a similar concern being raised by Paul to the Christians in Corinth. In that letter he scolds the wealthier members of the church for getting drunk and overeating at their table fellowship. He tells them, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”

The social distinctions that were common in everyday Roman society were seeping into the life of the church. Paul saw it early on, and James continues to see it in his day. Creating a pecking order is a favorite activity for us humans. We do it almost instinctively, the way dogs do whenever several are brought together from different households. The difference is we can choose not to do that. If we’re introspective enough to be aware of how our actions affect the people around us. Or if we’re confronted by someone who can startle us into awareness.

When the Syro-Phoenician woman approached Jesus, she had no reason really to expect him to respond to her. She must have known how many boundaries she was crossing—gender, ethnic, religious—by accosting him in public. A lot has been written about Jesus’ response to her. Was he testing her faith; an odd assumption considering he doesn’t do that to anyone anywhere else in the gospels before receiving healing. One commentator even suggests he was joking with her. If that’s true then Jesus has a terrible sense of humor. To make a joke at the expense of a woman who’s desperately seeking help for her daughter seems sadistic. I think the only explanation for Jesus’ words in this encounter is he believed them. He really believed her

problem was not his problem. And it's only her persistence, her willingness to challenge him, what one writer calls her sass, that brings him to a new understanding.

The Gentile woman, a person with three strikes against her socially in Jesus' world, changes the course of his ministry. She opens a vista to Jesus that in Mark's estimation he hadn't considered before. The idea that good news is not restricted by ethnic or religious or gender boundaries was an insight even Jesus had never imagined possible. But once he does, there's no stopping him. Next he heals a deaf-mute man from the same region, then he feeds another whole population who "ate and were filled," showing that God will not stop crossing boundaries.

That boundary-crossing quality is the real power of the gospel. But unless it's put into action within the real life of a congregation it remains hidden and worthless. What James is concerned with is his communities' failure to understand the world-changing potential of their faith. I think that's what he means when he says, "faith without works is dead." He isn't saying we have to earn our way into heaven or into God's favor. He's saying if our faith doesn't compel us to act in ways that change people's lives, then it will shrivel on the vine. It's a waste.

And surely we can see that he's right. Over the years, within various presbyteries where congregations have closed, I've noticed almost none of them have closed for lack of resources. Churches close when they can't figure out how to put their faith to work. They close when all they can offer someone who comes looking for food or clothing are kind words, thoughts and prayers.

James is issuing a challenge to us across the millennia that separate us. He's giving us some sass the way the Syrophenician woman did to Jesus. If we really believe what we say we do, if we really believe that all the barriers have been broken down and we are new creatures in Christ, then what are we going to do? Because we live in a world where people are crying out for healing. We live in a world that is becoming more and more divided by the day; where barriers are being erected to keep us afraid of one another, whether it's by creating fake controversies through conspiracy theories or building a physical wall to cut us off from people seeking help. What work does our faith call us to do if we want to overcome those divisions and truly live as Christ's disciples?

One thing we can do, to bring faith to life, is reach out and create relationships across boundaries. In the next few weeks, when Afghan refugees begin arriving in our community, rather than waiting for them to come to us, we can go to them. We can become a source of refuge and bring concrete help to people in need. What better way is there right now to put our faith to work? And, honestly, we do have an advantage over the people James is writing. We've done this before. We have a rich history of providing material help to people in need here at North.

But the need never stops. One big difference between us and the writers of the New Testament is they mostly believed it wouldn't be long before everything would be brought to an end. The church only needed to hold on for a little longer. We know better. After two thousand years we know the need for generosity, compassion and justice will never end. And we will always be God's instruments in the world to provide an alternative, to break down the barriers

that divide us. We cannot let this faith we love, the hope our world so desperately needs, to wither away and die on the vine. Friends, there's work to be done, and it's up to us to do it.

Amen