

## A Living Faith

James 2:1-17

Good morning! In the past weeks we basically dealt with the importance of Spiritual transformation—well, that was our central theme. You've heard us talk about imitating God, about wearing Christ, about being filled with the Holy Spirit. And last week we talked about being changed from the inside out. Well, today I would like to continue with that same theme, but this time we move back into the epistles in the epistle of James 2:1-17.

Most Bible scholars agree that James was actually written by James, the brother of Jesus, who at that time was a prominent leader in the Christian Church in Jerusalem. His letter was actually addressed to the 12 tribes scattered—and that is to Jewish Christians scattered everywhere. And if you're going to analyze the text it is actually a clear call for Christians to practice a faith that is alive and not a faith that is dead. And there are two verses here that captures that:

<sup>14</sup>*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*

<sup>17</sup>*In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

So what is a dead faith? It is a lifeless faith. In the eyes of people it's there—but in reality it's a useless faith. So here while we find James talk about what makes faith a dead faith, he also in effect outlines for us what makes faith a living faith. First, James says that a living faith...

### 1. Practices impartiality

<sup>3</sup>*If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," <sup>4</sup>have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

What's the scenario here? James criticized the reality that there was favoritism taking place in the churches. He said that Christians tend to give special preference to the rich by having them take the best seats while pointing the poor to seat on the floor.

He is essentially saying if you call yourself a Christian—if you count yourself belonging to the church of Christ and profess faith in him you shouldn't practice favoritism—you shouldn't be impartial—you should practice impartiality.

James actually called those who are prejudiced to other people as "*judges with evil thoughts*"? Why? Well it's because they make judgments with evil intentions. Well there's a tendency to favor the rich because they have the capability to give more. The rich are an asset to the church—so we have to take care of them. And so the poor get little or no attention at all. Why? because they're no good to the financial health of the church, they don't have anything to give us. They can be a financial burden, so to speak, and so why bother with them in the first place. So what is at the heart of this evil practice? It's selfishness... And because of that James says that this is inconsistent to the faith we profess. He's kinda saying "hey our faith is in Christ...not with people. If our faith is in people then our faith in Christ is non-existent—therefore, it is dead.

I'm sure you know that this didn't only take place during the time of James. It still happens in churches until now. Church, it is my prayer that Sitka United Methodist Church will continue to be a welcoming church to all people—that it will not discriminate between rich or poor, one class or the other class, tall and small, young and old. It is my hope that this church will be reflective of our community here in Sitka. Can I hear an Amen to that?

But James as he further elaborated on favoritism, he went on to reveal a second principle on what makes faith a living faith. It is this: A living faith ...

## 2. Shows mercy

*<sup>12</sup>Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, <sup>13</sup>because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!*

So James says speak and act as someone who will be “*judged by the law that gives freedom.*” Notice here, James doesn't say “speak and act just like those who will be judged the law of death or punishment.” He said “*law that gives freedom.*” Do you know what is this “*law that gives freedom*”? It is the law of grace—the law of grace that was made possible through Christ death on the cross.

The law of freedom is the abounding mercy that God has shown. We were all supposed to be condemned because of our sins, but because of God's great mercy, God suspended the judgment of the law of death that was upon us through Jesus Christ. That's why whenever you see the cross, may you be reminded of what James said “*mercy triumphs over judgment.*” Church, let me repeat that, mercy triumphs over judgment!

And so what is James' point here then? It is this church: speak and act in a manner worthy of someone who has been shown mercy. Therefore, be merciful! So what happens then if we are not merciful? James said “*Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.*” Does this sound familiar? Remember that part in the Lord's prayer? “and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It appears that God's mercy and our mercy towards others go together. They always go hand in hand.

But you may ask, well Pastor Luther, do you mean that God's mercy upon us is dependent on our mercy to others? Well my answer to that is I don't think so. But one thing is clear here: If we claim that we fully understand the depth of God's mercy towards us, then you will surely be merciful to others. Now, if were not merciful and claim to have faith then we have a problem.

To not forgive, or to not be merciful is not an option for someone who has been shown mercy. Maybe sometime in our past we have been deeply hurt by those we loved or trusted—and now you're still feeling that pain inside. Well, God's words for us this morning is this: Be merciful! So what does it mean to dispense mercy?—it is to release a person from any penalty, obligation or whatever he or she owes that will appease or compensate your hurt. Be merciful!

Remember you are now under the law that gives freedom. If you are still under the law that gives death, then go ahead by all means be not merciful. But the truth be told, we have received mercy from God even though we don't deserve it, therefore, be we need to be merciful too. James says that a living faith is impartial, and a living faith shows mercy, but he doesn't end there. James also revealed a third principle. A living faith is..

### **3. Acted Out.**

*<sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,"but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?*

The key phrase here is "physical needs." James is trying to say, "yes, you may be very good in meeting spiritual needs and yet you don't make any effort to meet physical needs. James says that if we are only occupied with meeting spiritual needs then our faith is dead. Our faith is senseless. In other words what good is our message when we don't back them up with action.

That's why it is important that as a church while we try to minister to the spiritual needs of our community. Let us also continue to do something for the poor, for the homeless and hungry in our community. I hope we include this in our programs. We need to be intentional about this.

There's always has been a question whether James was talking about salvation by works—that is, you need to do good works first to merit salvation. Let it be clear that James is not talking about this. But what is clear here in the text is this: James seems to be asking the question: "since God has saved you what is now your response?" Church, good works is our response to salvation, it is not a requirement to salvation. When you are saved, you get to be a good person—of course it's a process—God changes your priorities, your outlook and the way you treat people. You don't do good works to be saved, but instead, you do good works because you are saved.

So what happens when you don't see any evidence for the faith you have in Jesus Christ? One of two things is happening, either that faith wasn't genuine in the first place—it is just an intellectual idea you embraced or maybe you just kept on resisting the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in your life. Remember our lesson last week about allowing the Holy Spirit to change our hearts. That happens when we put our trust in God on a daily basis

But as renewal takes place in the heart, it doesn't stay in the heart it shows in our actions. It is a living faith. It will show in the way we conduct our business, our work, but also 1) in the way we look at people, 2) in the way we handle those who have hurt us in the past, and 3) in the way treat the poor or those who cannot help themselves.

Last week I had this interesting conversation with a guy who lives across the street. He said that he used to go to a church where the teaching was solid. But then he felt that something was missing. Then he ended up going to the Salvation Army Church, which we all know does a lot for the poor in our community. He said "there we really get our feet wet."

Let us pray for a living faith today....

Dear Lord Jesus, we want to have a living faith in you. The kind of faith that changes who we are. We want to be totally transformed overnight but we know that won't happen but we want to be growing. We have different relationships, different passions, different interests, different priorities. Jesus Christ change us, forgive us and grow us to be the persons that you called us to be. Change us from the inside out. Help us to be welcoming and impartial. Help us to be merciful and to be forgiving even to those that we think don't deserve our mercy. And help us to be a church that will help cloth the naked and feed the hungry. Enable each one of us here in this sanctuary to have a living faith. This is our prayer in your name Amen.