

Living Faith

TEXT: James 2:14-26

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 15, 2024

Long ago in a galaxy far, far away—which in this case would have been Florida in the late 1980's—I was besieged by a Bible verse. I was in my late twenties and had not yet darkened a seminary door, although I was extremely active in my local Methodist church, just outside of Gainesville. The siege lasted a few weeks, and the verse that kept showing up everywhere I turned was the first verse of Hebrews 11: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen."

Part of the reason that verse turned up everywhere was that it was the assigned verse in a book I did not know existed at the time, The Revised Common Lectionary—the three-year cycle of Bible readings that many denominations, including ours, encourage pastors to use in their Sunday sermons. So, part of the reason I heard the verse in my church in the morning, in a different church on Sunday night, and in sermons I heard on the radio, was that Hebrews 11:1 was part of the lectionary readings suggested for that first week.

I didn't know any of that, so the constant repetition struck me as a message from God that I needed to pay attention to the topic of faith. And I began praying for God to show me what I needed to know and why I was being repeatedly hit in the face with that verse. In my defense, it wasn't just in sermons where the verse kept showing up, and it wasn't just the week when the lectionary used it. I went into a bookstore—there on a poster in the religious section was Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." I saw it on a bumper sticker on a car.

I went to my pastor at the time and asked her for a book on faith. She gave me a book by German theologian Paul Tillich. I read it, but didn't feel particularly enlightened. I went to every faith passage I could think of in the Bible, spending a lot of time with Paul. No light bulbs going off.

But the thing that really sent me over the edge—after asking God for weeks to kindly give me a bit more information about the deficiency in my understanding on faith, reading the Tillich book, and searching my Bible to no avail; after all that—I saw the verse again. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen," draped across the top of a multi-story building! I'm sure that didn't change with the lectionary readings.

When I saw it across the building, I literally pulled over and yelled at God. "Okay! Okay! I get it! I need to learn more about faith. But I need more information! I know the verse. I had to memorize it in Sunday School years ago. Stop it with the verse, and tell me what I'm missing!" If God had been a physical being riding in my car, I would have made God get out and walk. I was done with seeing the verse without any further direction.

I got back to the house, got out my Bible, and prayed again. "What am I missing??" And God said, simply, "James." I argued back, "What do you mean, "James? James is about works, not faith!" I had read the book of James; by that time in my life I had read the Bible cover to cover many times. But in my lifetime in Protestant churches—especially in my native Rhode Island, which had the largest percentage of Catholics in the country at the time—I had unknowingly drunk a bit of Kool-Aid about the relationship between faith and works.

Martin Luther, the Catholic priest who unleashed the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century, was finding his faith increasingly unbearable as he was being taught that any sin, however slight, would condemn him to hell if he didn't confess it and do penance for it. We talked about this last month when the priest hearing Luther's increasingly tortured confessions finally told him to please go out and do something worth confessing. And we talked about Luther's release from his personal bondage when he really sat down and read Romans 3 where Paul emphasizes that it is faith and not our works that saves us. Romans 3:28, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."

The relief to Luther in reading Romans 3 and learning that God would accept him by faith and not works, unleashed the massive force that was Martin Luther onto the Catholic Church of his day, and it changed the face of Christianity across the globe from then on. One of the rallying cries of the Protestant Reformation was "Sola Fides!" "Faith alone!"

So when Luther read the book of James, who claims—as Cathy read earlier—“Faith without works is dead,” Luther heard that as a threat. Martin Luther translated the entire Bible into German, so that everyone in his country could have access to its words, and he very much wanted to leave the book of James out. He called it a “Straw epistle” and wanted it excluded from Bibles. He also wanted to trash the book of Revelation, which is a bit more understandable, but he didn’t get his wish on either count.

But, pretty much overnight, one of the litmus tests for whether you were Protestant or Catholic was whether you believed that salvation came through faith or through works; and that was set up as Paul vs James. Over time it spilled over into the understanding of the sacraments, and basically turned into a bumper sticker, binary reduction of two complex ideas into two rival and incompatible approaches to Christian salvation: Faith vs Works.

When I was born into a Baptist church in the 20th century, that dividing line was already four-centuries old and still going strong. And, in a state where I was the only kid on the school bus on Wednesday afternoons because all my classmates were attending Catechism at their Catholic parishes, the faith vs works line was just in the air that I breathed. And, at the time I was getting hit with “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen” in the 80’s, we were still a decade away from putting that centuries-old distinction to rest.

It wasn’t until 1999, that the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” was signed by both the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation, putting aside the theological sound bites and declaring that they now shared “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ.” That document wasn’t Catholics converting to the Protestant understanding. It was a recognition that we had both meant the same thing with different words for the previous 500 years.

As of 2017, 75% of the world’s 2.4 billion Christians, including the World Methodist Council, have formally affirmed the Joint Declaration. And the root of that agreement is actually in both Paul and James. Last month, we talked about the fact that Romans has more than three chapters. Paul has a robust defense of the Law of Moses in there. For Paul, our works are critical. They’re just done as a grateful response to God’s saving grace, as opposed to doing them as a way of earning God’s favor.

And, of course, the only time Jesus actually paints a picture of the final judgment of human beings by God, at the end of Matthew 25, the division is made according to how people have behaved. Those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit those sick and in prison—those are the ones God welcomes into the heavenly realms, while those who don’t do those things are cast out. Works matter.

But back in the late 80’s, there was not yet a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, and in all my biblical searching on the subject of faith, the one place I was trained—almost subconsciously—NOT to look was the book of James—especially not chapter 2 with the “Faith without works is dead” line. But God said “James,” and so I opened up my Bible to look again.

One thing that Hebrews 11 and James 2 have in common is that they both rehearse the faith of Israel’s heroes. Hebrews 11 is known as “the faith chapter” for that reason. James includes fewer people, but both of the people James lifts up—Abraham and Rahab—are also in Hebrews 11.

As I got back into James, I didn’t just jump to the “faith without works is dead” part, which is a point James makes at both the beginning and end of his argument in the second half of the second chapter. But, for once, I slowed down and paid attention to his argument in-between those bookends, especially where James calls out the example of Abraham, as Hebrews 11 does. And, all of a sudden, as he talked about Abraham’s faith not only being voiced but tested, James 2:22 jumped off the page: “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.”

I read that verse probably a dozen times. “His faith was made complete by what he did.” Not only was there no contradiction between faith and works, there wasn’t even any distinction. They were the same thing. To say that someone has faith is a nonsensical statement if that faith isn’t evidenced in what they do. We’re warned constantly in all kinds of settings, “Don’t listen to what they say, watch what they do.” Why? Because when we actually believe something, that becomes manifest in some way in our actions. That’s part of Hebrews 11:1. Faith is both evidence and substance. You don’t have either evidence or substance if it’s just a belief in someone’s head. Our

faith is made complete, alive, when there is substance and evidence put on the bones of our belief. It is made complete by what we do.

Because I believe in Climate Change, when I bought a house on the Cape in 2015, I checked the elevation against the projections of sea level rise for the area before I bought. I was not in a flood zone, but I bought flood insurance anyway, as I watched areas of the country much further inland get destroyed when 20 inches of rain fell in 48 hours and watched 500- and 100-year floods start happening every five or ten years. I believe that is the new normal, and I acted accordingly.

It's like that for every single person, and has nothing to do with faith. We will eventually act on what we believe to be true, even when we're wrong. That's why conspiracy theories are so dangerous. This past week, the town of Springfield, Ohio, was flooded with bomb threats, had to close schools for two days, and the 15,000 Haitian legal immigrants in the little town of 60,000 people, are, as we speak, in fear for their lives because of a xenophobic smear campaign spread to 60 million people on national TV last Tuesday night and amplified since.

That bigoted, totally untrue smear claimed—with zero evidence, and strong denials from all levels of that town's government—that Haitians in that town were eating white people's pets. A lie made up out of whole cloth is now being used to dehumanize people to make their deportation acceptable, even though they are there legally.

Spreading even absurd, easily-disproven lies will get some people to believe them, and once they believe them, they will act. That's how human nature works.

Early in Matthew's Gospel, as Jesus is teaching in what we now call the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus ticks through many of the actions in the Ten Commandments, but with a twist. There's a kind of formula in his words as he describes the commandments: "You've heard it said...but I say to you." In that formula, when Jesus says, for example in Matthew 5:21, "You've heard it said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment,'" he doesn't follow that with saying that killing is okay and will simply be forgiven.

He says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." He does the same thing with the adultery commandment, moving backwards from the action to what is going on in the heart and says you're in just as much trouble if you lust after someone as if you actually committed adultery. Why? Because what is inside eventually comes out.

What we believe influences our emotional state in certain situations and that leads to action. Not just in religious beliefs but in what we believe about anything from investing in the stock market to buying groceries to our choice of work, play, and relationships with others. If we believe some people are inferior to others, that's going to come out—sometimes in ways we recognize and often in ways we don't.

At the beginning of Jesus speaking about all of that in Matthew 5, I hear the point James is making. Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." In the language of James, Jesus has come to complete the faith represented in the law through his actions. It is completion, not replacement, because our faith is only made complete by what we do.

Paul, even in Romans 3, makes the same point as he says in Romans 3:31, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." Paul is just working the same equation starting at the other end.

I think a lot of the misunderstanding could have been avoided if we translated the Greek word *pistis* as "faithfulness" instead of just "faith." The word "Faithfulness" implies acting in a way that is in concert with what we believe. Faith and works are not separate things. They're the beginning and end of a process that occurs naturally in people, and to some degree across living species. If an animal believes you are a threat, the creature will do the same thing humans will do—fight, flee, or freeze. What it believes becomes evident in its actions, even if those beliefs are wrong; and that process, from belief to action, is one thing, not two.

When we try to separate belief from action in religious matters, we invariably get into trouble. If we leave belief in our heads alone, we end up turning people away from Christianity by our hypocrisy. We say we believe in Jesus—that Jesus is, in fact, God—and then we behave as if his teachings don't matter and aren't relevant, putting our real

faith and trust elsewhere. It's obvious to anyone watching our actions what we believe; and they judge us accordingly.

If we insist that God is only interested in our behavior, then we get a different set of problems, since there are plenty of people who do outwardly good things for reasons that have no basis in Christian teaching. We want to raise our status in society; we want to be seen as charitable on the outside, even though we're financially robbing the charity blind behind the scenes. We don't believe God really loves us and keep trying to help people in ways they don't want and haven't asked for in an attempt to impress God and feel worthy.

I remember one of Garrison Keillor's monologues when he warned clergy not to tell people that God will forgive them. Everyone is helping in the church out of guilt, he said, so if you tell them they're forgiven, you'll lose all your volunteers! He was only half kidding.

"His faith was made complete by what he did." Faith and works; belief and action are a single process common to all living species to one degree or another. If we have one but not the other, our faith is dead; the process is not complete.

It's perhaps the single most important takeaway from this whole series on heretics. What we believe is important because it will—naturally and always—affect the way we behave. Our faith will be made complete, for good or for ill, by what we do. And what we do will determine the kind of world we live in—whether God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven or whether it will be on earth as it is in hell.

The choir this morning will be singing a mashup of two Spirituals about the day of judgment. We often hear such words as either a prelude to an altar call to profess a belief we think will save us, or as a threat if we don't clean up our act in how we behave. "Where will you be when the trumpet sounds? Sinner, please don't let this harvest pass."

But for the enslaved Africans who first sang these songs, they were a call to specific and immediate action. They were a kind of code to explain where to go to find freedom, not in the life hereafter, but later that night or early in the morning. The sweet chariot coming to carry them home, might be a hay wagon, secured by Harriet Tubman, taking them to a free home in the north. And they sang out the need to not let that harvest pass, lest you remain in your bondage.

As the choir comes forward to sing, I invite you to hear the words as those who first sang them understood them. Those who enslaved them listened to the songs and were happy to think they expressed only a belief in a freedom in the afterlife—something oppressors still encourage among those they oppress. Set your hopes on a heavenly crown and you're less likely to become desperate enough to act about your earthly lot.

And while it's atrocious to think that so many Christians—then and now—were content to let Jesus be the only one whose faith was fulfilled in action in this life, there were those who risked their lives to physically harvest captives in the night and carry them to freedom, making sure they're in a safe place and ready to rejoice when the trumpet sounds.

Faith without works is dead, because it's not complete. Our faith, just like the faith of Jesus, Abraham, Moses, Rahab and every person who has allowed their own beliefs to become manifest in loving action, that faith is made complete by what we do. That is living faith. Amen.