Faith and Works

TEXT: James 2:1-18

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 8, 2026

My initial draft of this sermon went into the origins of the debate between whether we are saved by faith or by works, why Martin Luther didn't want to include the book of James in his German translation of the Bible, and blocked the book from being taught in the University in Heidelberg, and said, "Someday I will use James to fire my stove." But by the time I had finished that, there was no more time left for my main point. So, I tossed it Friday morning and started over.

I will simply sum that up by saying that if you've ever advocated for today's Christians to practice the things Jesus actually taught his followers to do—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, loving your neighbor, etc.—and have had someone shout in your face, "That's works-righteousness!" that's Luther's fault.

The book of James has been set against Paul's words in Romans 3 about being saved by faith ever since, and how otherwise brilliant theologians could not see that such a division was not ever necessary is only comprehensible to me if they found that position to be politically or personally expedient in whatever century they found themselves.

It took the Lutherans themselves until 2013 to resolve the issue, when they wisely pointed out the obvious: James and Paul were addressing two different mistakes. Paul was stressing faith to those who thought what people believed was unimportant; and James was dealing with the opposite mistake of thinking that God is cool with any kind of behavior as long as we profess the right beliefs.

They and others could have gotten there over a millennium earlier had they just, you know, read the book of James. For that matter, Romans is as much a defender of the works of the law as James is of faith; but James is simply easier to read than Paul.

When James says in chapter 2, verse 18, "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith." That's the ballgame. And then, in the verses after our passage from this morning, James further connects the dots with some examples and points out that the faith of Abraham was completed by following through with action.

I have long thought that, at least in English translations, the point could be made more easily if we replaced the word "faith" with "faithfulness." The latter has behavior baked into its meaning. Using language in a way that allows for separating faith from the actions it engenders has given us much of the mess we find ourselves in.

The simple psychology is that, unless restrained physically, legally, or morally, what we believe will turn into action. This is woven into the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus in many places, but it's not anything unique to his teaching or the teaching of any religion. Our actions spring from what we have come to believe about the world around us. I believe that our climate is changing and I have acted on that every time I've bought a house, or spent money to improve one, mitigating against whatever risks are most likely in that area.

And you do the same—maybe not with that belief, but with others, especially when you believe there is a threat of some kind, whether it's a threat from a burglar or the threat of hell. Absent interference or restraint, belief leads to action and action showcases what we truly believe. When those two things are in sync, we are living lives that are true to ourselves and our values.

That said, there are beliefs and values that stand in stark opposition to each other and result in vastly different actions and ways of living in the world. One of the core purposes of both religion and politics is to evaluate the beliefs associated with a candidate for office, a civic organization, or a religious group and to do our best in thinking about where those beliefs might lead should there be no restraint and whether we would be comfortable participating in that.

In the weeks after 9/11, we began to find out more about the terrorists who flew the suicide missions that destroyed the World Trade Center, hit the Pentagon, and were thwarted from hitting either the Capitol or the White House by the brave passengers on Flight 93 who learned what was happening elsewhere, stormed the cockpit and brought the whole plane crashing down into a field in Shanksville, PA, choosing to end their lives to save others instead of turning into a weapon that was headed to kill as many as possible in DC.

One of the things that came out in those weeks following the attacks were pamphlets that were basically devotionals for the hijackers, reminding them why they were doing what they were doing to help them keep their resolve and their courage. They were statements of belief to justify their actions. And I was chilled to the bone as I read them, not because they were horrible, but because they were all things that I had either heard or said myself in Christian contexts.

They were words about obedience to God's command and promises to God's faithful. They were promises of eternal life, rewards for faithfulness, even, and especially, if it cost your life. I could have read those pamphlets from the pulpit without saying where they came from and people would have applauded my sermon going out the door.

Had the heroes who stormed the cockpit and took down Flight 93 had those pamphlets, they might well have been as strengthened in their resolve to save others as the hijackers were strengthened in their resolve to kill.

The thought that something I might say from the pulpit—or even privately for that matter—could be used to justify mass slaughter kept me burning the midnight oil for many weeks to try to figure out what nuance could be included in my words to prevent them from being twisted to such harm.

The answer, I think, is first in recognizing that faith and action are linked. Ignoring beliefs we consider fringe or extreme because, "Well, who could believe that," has given us Christian Nationalists and White Supremacists in positions of unchecked power where they are starting wars, holding the nuclear codes, and illegally snatching people off the streets and putting them in inhumane detention camps with no one willing or able to restrain them. Understand that those outcomes are directed by people whose beliefs about God and the world are in sync with those actions.

While we need more nuance on the faith side of the equation we have to be clearer about the risks on the works side and the direct connection between the two. The faith-works continuum for me is that I believe Jesus speaks with God's voice and acts according to the fruit of righteousness in the heart of God. So, what Jesus says and does are my model and guide.

I don't always live up to that; but that's my goal, and Jesus' focus—from his first teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and calling out blessings on the poor and the hungry to his last night on earth washing the feet of his disciples—is on how to treat people in the here and now. In the flesh; on this earth. Incarnation.

The biblical visions of a world of joy and peace for all people and the banquet where all are welcome are not just a promise for a life after this one; they are the ideal world that God expects us to work for with the one precious earthly life we have been given.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches that we can tell false prophets from true prophets by their fruit—that is, by their works. True and false prophets may all sound the same when they speak, but it is the actions that will tell you what someone truly believes.

Jesus gives us one, and only one, description of the final judgment of humanity, which helpfully includes the criteria that God will look for in those who are ushered into God's kingdom and those who will be cast into a lake of fire reserved for the devil and his angels.

You will find it in Matthew 25:31-46 and the criteria are all actions. The righteous are those who feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothing to the naked, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison. That's the exact list. And the list of things that gets you a trip to the flames is not some different list of sins or false creeds, it's simply the people who don't do the things listed on the first list for the righteous.

And if you want the more succinct version, when Jesus is asked in Luke 10:25 what a person needs to do to inherit eternal life, the answer is to love God and your neighbor as yourself. Period. End of story.

What we believe is critically important, and that does need some nuance. If we say we believe in God, for example, we need to be more specific about the nature of that God because, as James reminds us in chapter two verse 19: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder." If you say, "I believe in justice," that's a start, but so does ICE. Define your terms. But we would also be well-advised to balance our verbal witness by the words of St. Francis who said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

We are far too late in recognizing that beliefs will become actions; and bad theology will become bad policy; and the ideas we ignore because they sound too crazy, are just one viral video away from public office. Belief and action, faith and works are inseparable and will, in time, affect us all.

But also, while the consequences of our inattention will last for generations and the ship called "Normal" has sailed; we can still, within our own communities and spheres of influence, create what Margaret Wheatley describes as "Islands of Sanity." How do we do that? Here's an example from an event last month, on a 30-degree day in Chicago.

A young man, Lio Cundiff, was sitting on a bench and talking on the phone by the harbor when he heard a woman scream. He looked up and saw her chasing a stroller, her baby girl strapped inside, as it got caught up in a 50-mph wind gust. She couldn't reach it in time; and both stroller and baby flew into the frigid waters of Lake Michigan.

Lio, who does not swim, jumped into the freezing waters himself, to save her. He got to the baby and tried to keep the stroller floating upright, treading water and realizing that he now had no way to get either of them out. After about four minutes, a second man came on the scene and threw his jacket down for Lio to grab and between that man and the girl's mother, they pulled Lio, the baby, and the stroller out. Both Lio and the baby were taken to different hospitals. They are both now fine.

As Lio was interviewed afterwards and described what went through his mind throughout the ordeal, his words illustrate the point. After noting that the mother was "too panicked to do anything," Lio thought, "I guess I'm jumping in. That baby was…I wasn't going to let that baby die. That's crazy."

Right there is a belief that is core to who Lio is…it's crazy to let a baby die when you have the ability to do something about it—or maybe even if you don't, because Lio couldn't swim. Lio is a trans man, targeted by hate in every way imaginable from all sides. But he didn't let the hate of others corrupt his own soul. He could not return hate for hate or wall himself off from the suffering of others.

Imagine a world where every person just held Lio's core belief that it's crazy to watch a child—any child of any nation of any color or class—die when you can do something to prevent it, even if you might die trying.

When Lio was in the water with the baby and realized he didn't know how long he could keep either of them afloat, he said, "I just kind of grabbed her hand and just, like, rubbed her hand a little." That, too, is an action

that sprang from a belief that even in what might be your final actions on earth, let no one die alone or without compassion.

Lio also noted that he didn't really realize his own beliefs until they moved him to act. He said, "Turns out if I have to choose fight or flight, I guess I'm a fighter. Always thought I was a runner; I guess not today." What we believe about ourselves isn't always accurate; it's our actions that prove our values and what we really believe, sometimes surprising even ourselves.

His response to all the attention was to say, "All I did was a human act. I'm just a human who did the most human thing you could do, which is save someone who can't save themselves." Who we believe we are as human beings, all of us together and each of us individually, may lie buried deep within us. We may not really be able to say what it means to be human if we were directly asked.

But when the moment to act comes; when we are the only person with the power to do something when we see a crisis unfold; what we believe about the role of human beings in the world, what we believe about relationships and responsibilities to those we have never met, what we believe about who it would be crazy to let die or who is expendable will show up—sometimes in very public ways.

The second chapter of James could easily be mistaken for an op-ed from this week. If someone tries to suck you into a "works-righteousness" versus "faith alone" debate, just bookmark James 2 on your phone and read it to them. And if they say in response that you're obviously going to hell, pull it up again and read verses 12-13. "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement." Then, call it a day. Amen.