

Pastor's Message – 9/8/24
James 2:1-10, 14-17

Sometimes iconic lines from movies or TV shows can make their way into common culture and most everyone has heard them or knows where they came from. Sayings like, “Here’s looking at you, kid.” Or “Make my day.” Or, “I’ll be back.” Or maybe, “May the force be with you.”

I’m a Star Trek fan and have been since The Original Series in the 60’s and, as I was reading and reflecting on today’s Bible reading, a line from that Original Series, spoken often by Dr. McCoy, came to mind. Hence the title of my Message today, “He’s dead, Jim.” So, you might be wondering, “How does that connect with our reading from James 2 today?”

When is a person really dead? How does a doctor know? How do we know when our faith is dead?

There has been long debate in Christianity which lingers even until today. One can hardly read this passage in James without thinking of the alleged tension between James and Paul noted in Galatians 2 (see Acts 15). James’ insistence that “faith without works is dead” seems pointedly contrary to Paul’s insistence that one is “justified ... through faith in Christ ... [and] not by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16). You heard me mention last week that Martin Luther called the Letter of James a “gospel of straw.”

However, James and Paul complement each other well. James did not need Paul to speak his own word to the widespread social reality in which many of the “new” Christians were living out the “old” lifestyle, maintaining the social norms of a highly segregated culture. The description that James provides of the fawning greeting of a rich person and the dismissive welcome of the poor person in verse 3 of our Bible reading today reflects the social customs of the age. Thus, James has direct and pointed advice: *In God’s eyes, there is no distinction among people* — in fact, God's priority is for the poor. This is a countercultural message, even today.

James warns his readers not to be “caught up” in trying to fulfill every commandment, for it cannot be done. Rather, the believer is to be judged by “the law of liberty” (v. 12) which has been stated simply: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 8). The purpose of the law of liberty is to set people free to live in community and welcome everyone, having particular concern for the poor, the widow and the orphan (1:27). When that does not happen, when a church or an individual believer fails to live out their faith, that church or believer is dead.

I have been involved in hospice care and offered pastoral support to many families over the years enough to have experienced it. In some instances, doctors sometimes must tell people in a waiting room that their loved one is dead.

It’s a pronouncement none of us ever wants to hear regarding a loved one, but when a person is declared dead, it’s important that the declaration be correct. Rarely, but occasionally, a person who appears to have died, is not dead after all!

He or she suddenly exhibits signs of life again, and some even recovered. So, doctors want to get it right.

Because of medical life-support procedures, the cessation of heartbeat and breathing is sometimes not sufficient to say definitively that death has occurred. A stopped heart can sometimes be restarted (in fact, stopping and restarting a patient's heart is standard procedure during heart surgery), and breathing can be sustained by a ventilator.

Therefore, in cases when a person is sustained by life support but is believed to be otherwise dead, there's a standard *that's been adopted by every state in our country*: The patient is dead when there is no longer any functioning brain **activity**.

While physical death is not our subject, we can begin with the matter of setting criteria for when death occurs because, in a sense, that's what the James is doing in our passage for today.

But he's not talking about dead people; he's talking about dead faith.

He gives the shorthand version of his criteria in verse 17: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." But in the preceding verses, he spells it out more clearly. James' criteria for dead faith includes:

- + Acts of favoritism and partiality that result in dishonoring the poor within a Christian context (vv. 1-7).

- + Failure to keep the whole law, but instead choosing bits and pieces. This practice does not honor the divine law behind them all: love your neighbor as yourself (vv. 8-12).

- + Showing no mercy (v. 13).

- + Paying lip service to one's faith and not expressing that faith through good works (vv. 14-17).

But all of that can be summed up in his declaration that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

These criteria for declaring faith dead aren't given to help us make judgments *about other people's faith*; rather, they are for *self*-diagnosis. With the help of the Holy Spirit, James' signs of dead faith can enable us to resuscitate our faith when it is no longer moving.

"No longer moving" is exactly the right phrase, because unlike when a person physically dies and no longer communicates and no longer moves, people with dead faith keep right on talking, even when they've stopped "moving," as it were.

And that indeed is what James meant when he said, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Or, as it's sometimes popularly put, we need to not only talk the talk but also walk the walk.

Saying we have faith is never enough. We have to make a habit of putting our faith into action.

It's like the story of the who man hired a new bush pilot to take him caribou-hunting in Canada. He asked the pilot to land in a remote place.

The pilot said, "There aren't any caribou in this area."

The hunter said, "Yes, there are. I was here last year." Sure enough, in a few hours the hunter returned, dragging two caribou.

The pilot said, "You can't load two caribou. The plane can't bear the weight."

The hunter said, "Well, I did it last year. Same size plane, same size caribou." The pilot reluctantly agreed, and they took off.

The pilot was right. The plane couldn't carry the load and crashed into the side of a mountain.

Fortunately, no one was hurt. Observing the wreckage of his plane, the pilot got angry at the hunter: "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. I knew this plane couldn't carry two caribou. Now we're stranded on this mountain, and no one will ever find us."

"Don't worry," said the hunter, reassuringly. "The rescue team will find us in no time. We're just a few hundred feet from where we crashed last year."

We have a Lost-&-Found box in the church. You've probably seen them elsewhere. Here we have seven lost gloves and a lost mitten. Or maybe the sock monster ate one of your socks in the laundry and you have lost socks. Without having the pair, that one glove or one sock is not much good. So, it is with faith and works — they are a matching pair. Faith without works is like macaroni without cheese, Batman without Robin, birds without the bees, a hammer without nails, a lock without the key.

What makes faith powerful is the connection with the battery of good works. Our actions are the difference between a car that looks beautiful parked on the street and a car motoring down the highway, a car in motion, in action. It's an odd thing, but you can have *good works without faith but not faith without good works*. There are plenty of humanitarian, altruistic, or civic reasons to do good things for others. But you cannot have a Bible-based, "I-believe-in-God-and-in-Jesus-Christ-his-Son" Christian faith without works. Good works without faith, yes; faith without good works, no. Which makes it all the worse when Christians — people of faith — have stone cold hearts that do not beat for the needy. It's useless. It's like, "Where's the other glove?"

I've heard it often enough that when churches get into a financial bind, they sometimes stop or reduce their outreach and their giving. Maybe their donations to the community food pantry go down or the suggestion is made that the church should stop its mission giving through their apportionment payments. Some might claim membership in a church but never or rarely worship at that church, never live out their faith and support their church in their giving, or never participate in church activities.

In his letter to the church, James challenges us to keep our faith and our works together. "What good is it," asks James, "if you say you have faith but do not have works?" (v.14). The rich man in the story Jesus tells in the gospel of Luke (16:19-31), the story of Divas and Lazarus, may have had faith -- at the very least, he knew

about Father Abraham. But he showed no evidence of good works, since he failed to help the poor man who was lying at his gate.

"Can faith save you?" asks James. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (vv. 15-16). James is warning us about the danger of hypocrisy, in which a person's credibility is undermined by saying one thing and then doing another. James knows that it is impossible to respect a Christian who tells poor people to "keep warm and eat your fill" while failing to make an effort to clothe and feed them.

James tells us, without any obfuscation or disclaimers or qualifications, what it means to be religious. He does not define religion by specific beliefs or equate it with praise bands. It has nothing to do with numbers.

To James, religion is helping the down-and-out get up-and-in. Sanctification, becoming holy, growing in faith, is wrapped up in the outstretched hand of service.

Could that be it? Could religion be more duty performed than doctrine proclaimed? Deeds and not creeds?

Once upon a time -- when and where is not important -- there was a bear who traveled with a circus. He wasn't trained to do anything in the way that the performing bears were. His only role was to sit, or pace around, in a nine-by-nine foot cage that would be placed beside the road near the entrance to the circus itself. He was like a living billboard. People would see him and then they'd know that the circus was in town. Because he was more or less expendable, the bear was not especially well kept, his cage was seldom cleaned, and he was fed whatever was left over once the performing animals had been taken care of. All he ever did, day in and day out, was walk around in a square -- nine feet in each direction.

As things turned out, this was not a very well-run circus and eventually it went bankrupt. All the equipment was sold off, the performers had to find new jobs, and the animals were either sold to other circuses or sent off to zoos. Since our bear had no value as a performer, he was shipped off to a zoo. And by a great stroke of fortune, it was one of these zoos that are built in such a way that allows animals a lot of freedom of movement in areas that resemble their natural habitat, while also being protected from the visitors to the zoo. There were no cages. So there the bear was -- free to wander as he would within the overall confines of his surroundings. And yet, so this story goes, for the remainder of his life the bear never ventured beyond an area of a nine-by-nine-foot square. He was afraid to break out of his old pattern. ...

The only bars left were the ones in his mind and spirit, which proved to be as real as the ones that had been around him. It was those bars of the mind and spirit that he had to get rid of in order to truly know a resurrection. In order to truly be free and alive in Christ, we have to move and take action: moving beyond the laws into the law of love and service.