

Looking Beyond the Mirror

Menno Mennonite Church
September 5, 2021

Purpose: To explore the dual-minded nature of faith between belief and works.

Message: As people of faith, we are at our best when we recognize the connection between our believing and doing, balancing both for the benefit of the world and ourselves.

Scripture: James 1:17-25 (primary, please have read, with other as options), and Psalm 15

Synopsis: We turn to James to justify our living. It is a favorite of Anabaptist thought. Yet it is considered by many a heretical way of thinking about faith, barely worth inclusion in the canon (Martin Luther called it the “Epistle of Straw” suggesting it accordingly be burned). However it is thought of by history, it does remind us that the cherished aspects of our faith are not, ultimately, the point of doing faith.

We are tossed between two polarities; faith is either the personal relationship that means everything and can be maintained on Sunday Morning alone out of what we proclaim, or it is the ethical imperative of doing, so much so that we forget why it is that we do what we do. James calls us to look into the mirror and realize that faith must go hand in hand with action, but action cannot overpower faith. As such, our work becomes the small, persistent, promising actions of grace and hope that visit in our ordinary, work a day lives. Our labor of faith is becomes to serve and be served while resisting the cynicism and self-delusion of the world.

James 1:17-25

¹⁷ Every generous act of giving,
with every perfect gift, is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no variation
or shadow due to change.

¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose
he gave us birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved:
let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness
and rank growth of wickedness,
and welcome with meekness
the implanted word
that has the power to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word,
and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers,
they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

²⁴ for they look at themselves
and, on going away,
immediately forget what they were like.

²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law,
the law of liberty, and persevere,
being not hearers who forget but doers who act—
they will be blessed in their doing.

My love affair with the church began when Peter Dyck came to town. As one of the early generation of MCC movers and shakers, he was well known for what he had done and what he was, at the time doing. He and his wife Elfrieda were called to the work of refugee resettlement on behalf of the Mennonite Central Committee in Europe in the critical years following World War II. As part of their assignment in often impossible conditions, they helped shepherd a group from Stalinist Russia, through Nazi Germany and on to Paraguay and freedom. Reading of their adventures spurred my young imagination, finding in this story what, to me, amounted to a James Bond of faith, albeit without the Walther pistol, the martinis and the exploding watches. I don't think MCC was going to underwrite an Aston Martin either. There are number of books recalling these times and events, and they made for great reading, and as a kid, better still was sitting with the story teller himself. A gifted speaker who we would often host, he would light my imagination with notions of these stories. He would be careful to take time to speak with us directly, telling stories all the time. When I grew up I wanted to be like Peter and do deeds in the Name of Christ. All we really needed was a graphic novel to complete the superhero image I erected for him—whether it was well earned or not.

I think, on some levels, I still am in love with the romantic notion of churchly service. To some degree it is a requirement in this line of work; there has to be a bit of a desire to be more than just another day at the office to keep going in the midst of the challenges. In our house we refer to this desire to be about the great things, hoping of being of use is the way we wear our capes—for good and for ill. Capes are easy to trip on. But at the end of the day, I think that is what we all want to some degree—to have a faith that matters, and not just to us, but in the world beyond. We all have our heroes—Mother Teresa, Dirk Willems, Martin Luther King, those of the generations who went before us, the superheroes of our faith.

We, as Anabaptists, enjoy our James. He's a bit of our patron saint of epistolary writers, were we into that. Were you to read through the early church writings (pre Constantine) you will find this letter quoted with admiration and frequency. But a lot of that went away with the church that needed to rationalize itself to something far bigger than it had been. The folks who wrote the dogmas of the church—think Jerome, Augustine, and the people attached to the creeds—needed something a bit more conceptual and a little less practical. James fell out of favor, so much so that when they were settling on the canon of what would be actually in the Bible, there was a strong effort to delete James entirely. But here it is, though it is often ignored

or skipped all together. Martin Luther famously called it “the Epistle of Straw”, suggesting it ought to have the same fate as the chaff of the field.

I don’t go into this to show off my penchant for the arcane and useless, though it is something at which I do excel. Just know that within the church literature it is something that is looked at a bit sideways and askew, not unlike we Anabaptists who champion the concepts so well. Faith and work are one, that faith absent work is dead. This is the framework for our superheroes of faith. But there is more going on here than just James asking, politely, that people might be incarnating their faith and get on with it. What he is really on to here—and he comes back to it several times within the book—is the work of self deception, warning us against the impulse to think ourselves righteous no matter where we are.

This is a message that I think we each could do well to hear. We each know the ease with which our personal biases can get the better of us. James is reminding us here that there are times when it is very easy to deceive ourselves, to look in the mirror and see only what we want to see, seeing only that which agrees with what we are looking for and hope to find. It is something we all do, as we exercise selective sight. This is not about being a person of faith as much as it is about being firmly and fully human. I know that I just getting started in this game, but sometimes I am surprised to see just how much white hair exists in the mirror. I am guessing that I am not alone.

Our faith perceptions can take a couple of forms. The first is the self-satisfied faith that counts our performance of the stuff of faith—the ideas and rituals—ahead of anything else. We say our prayers, we believe the right things, we show up for church on time, and perhaps even sing Hallelujah whether we feel like it or not. This is the faith that is quite familiar, the one that is a personal accessory more than it is a particular impact of our lives. It is the personal faith that would lead us to believe that our conceptual believing is the issue that is of greatest import. I will readily say that this is what we most readily see in American piety by in large.

But there is another level of faith that can be almost even more deceiving. Rather than dismissing the Jameson vision of an embodied faith, it embraces it full heartedly, almost to the exclusion of all else. As easy as it is to disconnect faith from life, it is easy to disconnect life from faith. It is just as easy to think that we morally justify ourselves by voting the right way, driving the right car, by possessing the right ethics and doing the right things, being the ethical superheroes we would all like to be, regardless of the state of our soul, regardless of our sense of

spiritual connectedness to what it is that we are doing. It is easy to supplant faith in the resurrected Christ with the values that we would have that risen Savior endorse, no matter how admirable. We can substitute the righteous pull of tradition of good things for the passion of doing things because we meet Christ within them and extend Christ through them. We can short-circuit the spirituality of the why with “well, just because”. Righteousness through believing and behaving. Both polarities are deceptions. Neither extreme fully reflects God’s reality.

James grounds us not just in the need to incarnate that which we say that we believe, but also to ensure that that which we do remain rooted firmly in what it must—the soil of faith and calling. “Don’t be deceived,” James begins, “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above.” This is a good start. There is no cover charge. No minimum balance, but also there is no litmus test of doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons. There is no expectation of intention. EVERYTHING done in generosity, big small or tiny is a gift of grace and a gift of God and for God. Just as Jesus in Matthew 25 does not set a threshold on that which is done for the lost the least in the world, so too here it is all good. All of it is of God; even the stuff is ours and ours alone. God’s gift of grace and incarnated reality is with and works through us, and, as I am given to say, even in spite of us regardless of our intent or our right belief or our ability to be a superhero and pull off a cape. Further, faithfulness is the work of all places and all circumstances, in the home, at work, in the car EVERYWHERE is the context of faith. Everything is the working of God in our lives. We do well to remember that faith is a matter of doing, and not just hearing. We do well to remember that doing is a matter of faith, not just a matter of self-righteousness or personal ability.

James does more than just make a solid point. He moves on to give us example of what this looks like, and that which gets in the way. Being ready to listen, slower to speak, and more eager to care for those who are vulnerable are the real-time indicators of the faithful rooting of our intent. Doing what is right is one thing; doing what is right in a way that displays the grace of the one who sent us is still another. None of this is the stuff of a heroic act. What friend does not want to be a better listener? Who among us would not do well to check our road to anger and resentment? The list goes on.

Faith need not be complex, despite our inclination to make it so. Faith is being the people that God created in the world in the first place; those who will love, care, and be

connected to the whole of creation in the name of the one who created it. It is striving on this side of Eden to connect again to what should have never been separated. For too long we have allowed the faith passed down to us from generation to generation to become more about the acceptance of facts and figures and not enough about the being people in the way of Christ. Too often we reduce faith to a set of ethical imperatives and humanistic expectations and forget that it is God that lies at the center. We all know that the church desperately needs to be awakened from the self-deception that Sunday is the most important day of the Christian week, that it needs to hear that faith without work is dead. But we who have inherited the heritage of being doers of faith probably need to be reminded that work without faith is just as deadly, just as unsustainable, just as deceiving as anything else. We need to recall that work and intention without the faith that underlies it is simply more of the same noise and crash that amounts to nothing. We need—we all need—to look carefully in the mirror and know that faith is not about us, and neither is works. It is about God and the way of God in the world, and always will be. As such the heroes that emerge are those, often, that don't necessarily know that they are in such rare company. As much as we might be inspired by these stories, we only need know, and live this: . There is only need to be reminded that life—all of life is faith, and all of faith is, after all, life, even when we try so hard to separate the two.

On this weekend when we celebrate labor, we do well to bring the two more closely together. The old story is told of the Amish person who is asked by stranger whether they are a Christian and they respond 'Well, I don't really know. Why don't you ask my neighbor?'" It is how we prefer to live our lives of faith, because it is who we are, and who are called to be. And that is good. But we do well to hear all that James is saying and to look ourselves in the mirror long and hard, and attempt to really see what there is to see. For in doing so, in living beyond our own deceptions, and often in spite of them, we can best encounter all that God has in store for us, and better build the kingdom.

I want to close with a prayer from Soren Kierkegaard, that we might see clearly. It reads simply:

Lord! Give us weak eyes
for things that do not matter
and eyes full of clarity
in all your truth.