

Living Faith
James 2:1-17
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To begin my sermon, I'm going to need four volunteers.

Now, I have two requirements for these volunteers:

the first is, you need to be able to catch a middle-aged body;

specifically, my body;

and the second is, you need to be trustworthy.

My physical safety depends on you meeting both of these requirements.

That's because I'm going to do a trust fall.

Now, I'm sure many of you have done this at least once in your life,

either at summer camp when you were young

or as one of those dreaded team-building exercises as an adult.

In a trust fall, the expectations are simple.

I'm going to fall, and they're going to catch me.

Any questions?

(trust fall)

I admit it that this was kind of a hokey way to begin a sermon,

maybe even an embarrassing Christian cliché.

Normally, when the illustration of a trust fall is used in church settings,

it's to communicate that faith means putting ourselves in God's hands,

kind of a "let go, let God" sort of message.

I don't know about you, but even though that message seems right,

I have a hard time knowing what to do with it.

But, this morning, I'm using the trust fall to illustrate something

that isn't entirely the opposite of that message,

but as a way to focus on aspect of it that sometimes gets missed.

If I would have introduced the trust fall, invited those four volunteers forward,

sized then up and said, "Yes, I trust that you would catch me,"

and then them to return to their seats,

you would have rightly questioned my trust.

In the trust fall, it's not enough to say that I believe that they will catch me.

My body actually has to fall.

On the other hand, I would not have let myself fall unless I had some trust.

Trust and action is what faith is.

After all, is it possible to have trust without ever trusting?

To have faith without ever needing faith?

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:

Greetings.

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:1-4, NRSV)

This is how the epistle of James begins.

Straight to the point.

Not with a greeting of grace and peace like Paul begins his letters.

Not with a "Sorry it's taken me so long to get back to you,"

as I sometimes begin my emails after not responding for a day or two.

Not with a weather report and a listing of visitors to the bird feeder

like Sarah's grandma Leah did in her epistles to us:

"Dear Sarah and Mark," then clouds, temperature, humidity, precipitation,

5 sparrows, 4 robins, 3 goldfinches, 2 cardinals, and 1 squirrel,

which was her constant nemesis.

Leah wrote to us, weekly, and we missed those letters, deeply, when she died.

But James' letter doesn't begin with such niceties.

No, James dives right in with counsel, with instructions, with commands,

the first one being that his readers should take joy in their suffering,

a hard way to begin, isn't it?

I read somewhere that out of the 108 verses in James,

fifty-four of them include imperatives

about how those who call themselves Christians should live and behave.

With all those exhortations, Martin Luther famously rejected the book of James.

Luther thought that James contradicted Paul's letters

by teaching that our salvation is tied up with what we do – our works --

and not *sola fide*, faith alone, in what God has done for us in Jesus.¹

Luther even said that the book of James should be thrown out of schools.

That would be a real twist, wouldn't it?

Christians urging school boards *not* to teach something that is found in the Bible.

I'll let you answer that question.

But I think Luther's focus on correcting errors that he saw in the church,

led him to miss the wisdom that James teaches,

the wisdom that echoes both the teachings of Jesus

and what Paul communicates in his letters.

James has a different focus than what Luther was concerned about.

James is concerned about Christians –

particularly Christian communities, churches,

whose practices do not match

their profession of faith in Jesus.

Is it possible to have trust without ever trusting?

To have faith without ever needing faith?

We know James' answer.

James, chapter 2, verses 1 to 17.

¹ "Did Martin Luther really want James taken out of the Bible?", ZA Blog (March 6, 2019), <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/martin-luther-james-bible>.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:1-17, NRSV)

Is it possible to have trust without ever trusting?

To have faith without ever acting in faith?

We don't know the exact circumstances that prompted James' letter --
it was written in more of a general way,
not with a specific situation or audience in mind.

But it's clear that James sees a problem of bigotry that he wants to address,
specifically, the bigotry of class.

It's when richer church members are treated differently, more favorably,
than poorer church members,
and, more than that, when the needs of the poorer members
are met with pious platitudes and not with the clothing and food that they need.

Churches that exhibit this sort of favoritism and that sort of apathy,
have veered far from the Jesus in whom they profess their faith.

Any faith that is absent from the needs of the poor, the hungry, the thirsty,
the naked, the imprisoned, the stranger is also absent from Jesus.

It's a dead faith, and death is where it leads.

It's the opposite of the life Jesus lived and calls us into.

As Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote,

*God stands at every time unconditionally and passionately
on this and only on this side:
always against the exalted and for the lowly,*

*always against those who already have rights
and for those from whom they are robbed and taken away.²*

In other words, God is identified with the lowly,
and so, if we want to glorify God, we must identify with the lowly.

A faith that identifies God with human greatness
is to place human glory, arrogance, and domination,
on a pedestal to be worshipped as an idol.

Those on the underside of the American dream,
living in the shadows of Manifest Destiny,
pushed to the corners by the Doctrine of Discovery,
trampled by the currents of corrupted capitalism --
found in jails and detention centers in the home of the free;
are the ones in whom Christ is hidden and found.

Where your treasure is, there your faith is also.

This past week, I found in Berkey's digital archives
a one-page document outlining the history of Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship,
written by a former pastor.

Here's how it begins:

*Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship was planted
in the summer of 1979 by Waterford Mennonite Church
with the assistance of other Mennonite churches in the Goshen area.*

The initial name was West Goshen Fellowship.

The original purposes for starting the church were twofold:

- 1) To relieve overcrowding in several churches and*
- 2) To provide a church for middle-class people in northwest Goshen,
the fastest growing residential area in the city.*

I'm sure this isn't new to a lot of you.

Three years ago, Paula Killough did some work at Berkey during another pastoral transition.

She interviewed many people, many of you,
and offered reflections to help us understand ourselves better --
our strengths, our weaknesses, our vision going forward.

In her final report, she noted that she asked several of you
who have been with Berkey from the early years
about the history that I just read.

And you told her that it was never that way;
that Berkey's emphasis was on the whole community,
never just the middle class.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. II: The Doctrine of God, Part I*, eds. G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire (New York: T&T Clark, 1957 [repr. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010]), 386.

In fact, she was told, the original members of this congregation were quite diverse in class, socio-economic levels, worship preferences and theology.

And I'm glad about that.

To the extent that we haven't been faithful to those two goals, thanks be to God.

Because a congregation that is focused on the twin goals
of providing a place for people of overcrowded congregations to come,
and providing a church for middle-class people to come
is a church where Jesus will not be found,
and neither should we.

And yet, and yet, perhaps we've lived into those two goals
more than we'd like to admit, albeit unintentionally.

In her report, Paula Killough wrote that she heard from so many people
how Berkey excels at caring for people and loving people.

In times of serious illness, family crises, financial challenges and more,
Berkey's people step forward,
often even before being asked.

"I have not seen this level of care in any congregational context," she wrote.

Surely, yes, we do live into what we put before us.

And yet, and yet, she went on to write,
in the midst of this high level of care
a significant number of persons feel unseen and unheard.

Some single people feel invisible during fellowship time.

"Some older people feel a bit of a sting when young families
are often held up in praise," she wrote.

Please don't forget about us," one said.

Other groups who expressed similar pain
included those of different class and socio-economic levels,
and those who are single, attend without a spouse, or are a second spouse.

"You do well," James wrote

if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture,

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

(James 2:8-9)

I am glad that we have clarified the kind of church
that we desire to be.

In the very first paragraph of the welcome statement
that we place before us and the world, we say this:

As followers of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:14-20)

we are committed to living in community,

*practicing peacemaking that transcends socioeconomic barriers, acknowledges a diversity
of perspectives, and welcomes all.*

We go on to say that we celebrate –
not just tolerate, but celebrate --
the image of God manifested in persons
of every age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation,
marital status, education, intellectual or emotional or physical ability,
and economic or immigration status As an inclusive faith community,
And we say that all persons, including LGBTQ+ persons,
are welcome to fully participate in the life and ministry of our congregation.

It's a beautiful statement.³

But in order for our commitments, our welcome, our faith to be sincere --
to be more than empty, dead-faith identity markers
that we wave before others but go on as we were --
well, we actually have to live into them.

It's not possible to have trust without ever trusting.
It's not possible to have faith without ever acting in faith.
It's not possible to be committed without ever committing.

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters,
if you say you have faith but do not have works?
Can faith save you?
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?
So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17, NRSV)*

Last week, I invited your prayers for Paul Shetler Fast, for Rebecca and their children,
as Paul is in Haiti to help Mennonite Central Committee
plan its response to help people rebuild their lives
following the recent devastating earthquake.

"We don't preach a social gospel," as Archbishop Desmond Tutu said,
*we preach the gospel, period.
The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned with the whole person.
When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say,
"Now is that political or social?"
He said, "I feed you."
Because the good news to a hungry person is bread.*

In the name of Jesus,
as both reminder of what faith is
and as a call to commitment
I invite you to turn to #921 in the Voices Together hymnal,

³ <https://berkeyavenue.org/about/welcome-statement/>

and to read these words from Menno Simons,
from whom the Mennonite church take its name:

***Together: True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant
but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love.***

Part 1: It dies to flesh and blood;

Part 2: it destroys all forbidden lusts and desires;

it seeks, serves, and fears God in its inmost soul;

it clothes the naked;

it feeds the hungry;

it comforts the sorrowful;

it shelters the destitute;

it aids and consoles the sad;

it does good to those who do it harm;

it serves those who harm it;

it prays for those who persecute it;

it teaches, admonishes, and judges us with the Word of God;

it seeks those who are lost;

it binds up what is wounded;

it heals the sick;

it saves what is strong;

it becomes all things to all people.

***Together: The persecution, suffering, and anguish
that come to it for the sake of the truth of Christ
have become a glorious joy and comfort to it.***⁴

⁴ *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020); 921.