

Faith, Works, and Community | James 2:1-10, 14-17

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*“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?  
...So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”*

With a toddler and a baby,  
I spend a lot of time on playgrounds these days.  
While I'm *capable* of parenting on my own...  
Many days, I'd rather *not*.  
It is such a relief to show up in a place  
Where I know there will be other children to play with  
And other grownups to talk to,  
Helping me feel and be less alone.  
In the increasingly private, lonely experience  
Of raising children in America,  
I deeply appreciate that we still have the playground,  
A shared space, a public space  
Where we can get to know our neighbors.

I love our local playgrounds,  
And I've also come to expect having very similar,  
Very awkward encounters while there.  
I'll strike up a conversation with another parent or grandparent.  
We'll get to talking about how old our children are, where we live,  
And eventually they ask me about my work.  
“I'm ordained in the Episcopal Church.”  
If their expression is still blank, I say  
“I'm a minister.”  
There are a variety of reactions to this.  
Some people say “oh!” and change topics.  
Or “I'm spiritual but not religious,”  
If they're churchgoing people, they'll share their own background.  
But MUCH more often,  
I see a glimmer of discomfort,  
A fear of judgment in their expression,  
“Oh, I believe in God but I stopped going to church.”  
Or, “I consider myself a Christian but church isn't for me.”  
These are the most painful things for me to hear:  
Hard for me to hear,  
And ironic,  
As we stand having these conversations  
In a beautiful community gathering place,  
A place built so that resources may be shared,

A place made for joy and connection,  
A place open to anyone  
and ready and waiting to welcome..

In our reading from the letter of James this morning,  
There is a connection between being true believer  
With the creation of a whole community.  
A connection between being a true *follower of Christ*  
With the creation of a whole community.  
Whole, integrated people  
Make whole, integrated communities.

In the community we call church,  
we can practice  
Bridging our beliefs and our actions.  
We can practice  
sitting and standing and kneeling and serving and eating  
alongside people  
We might never come across  
In other parts of our lives.  
And when we rest in something greater,  
we can do things that are greater than we are as individuals  
In community, we have the opportunity to take what's in our hearts and our spirits  
And build a life out of them.  
It's in community with others that we become Christians,  
Become followers of Jesus.

The community that the epistle writer is addressing  
Is struggling to integrate belief and practice.  
Struggling to bring believing and doing into harmony:  
Just like so many communities after it.  
But being whole people  
means having our actions, our thoughts,  
our beliefs, and our loves align.  
Having continuity between what we do and what we say.  
Just having the "right beliefs"  
Isn't enough!

"My brothers and sisters,  
do you with your acts of favoritism  
really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?"  
In the treatment of the poor and the needy -  
And the privileging of those who already have privilege -  
The community that the epistle writer is addressing  
Might be talking the talk

But they aren't walking the walk.  
"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."

The writer reminds this community  
That the law of Moses still holds:  
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.  
Your neighbor's physical, material well-being  
Is *important* to God.  
And that upholding the law goes beyond lip service.  
James points out to these beloved brothers and sisters -  
your claims  
and your thoughts  
and your movements  
and your resistances  
and your hearts  
and your spirits  
are moving in different directions.

Countless words and so much blood has been shed over the centuries  
Over arguments about the relationship between faith and works.  
About the dynamic between God's overpowering, saving love  
And our responsibility and response to that love.  
I read a reflection by a religious historian named Haruko Nawata Ward  
That was particularly striking:

"During the reformation, while European Christians fought over correct doctrines of faith, they also exploited world markets for luxury goods such as sugar and spices, opened international banks, established unequal treaties with Asian nations, obtained massive American lands by force, and stole the free labor of millions of Africans. The majority of Christians were unaware that these activities produced great poverty, displacement, and oppression in someone else's backyard."

Violent failures to connect  
*believing* and *doing*.

In our world today,  
I can't help but think about  
The familiar chorus that follows a mass shooting in this country.  
It's a chorus that - depressingly - we know by heart.  
so many people  
who hold significant political power  
Often identifying as people of faith  
Offer their "thoughts and prayers"

For victims and their loved ones...  
And yet, do nothing with their votes and their influence  
To change the *conditions* under which  
This kind of violence keeps happening over and over again.  
How do people know our faith?  
By who we are in the world.  
God might know us by our hearts,  
but others only know us by our presence in the world.

“Can faith save you?” the writer asks.  
this morning,  
I hear that translated into,  
“can faith bring about the kingdom of God?”  
The good news is:  
There is nothing we need to do in order to earn God’s love and salvation.  
And the *other* good news is:  
This grace fills us with the ability to build God’s kingdom,  
To call the kingdom into being with our lives.  
What I really want to say to those people on the playground is:  
I wish you wouldn’t try following Jesus by yourself.  
While community can be imperfect and challenging -  
And there are lots of valid reasons why folks stop going to church -  
I can’t be Christian on my own.  
I need community to live out my faith.  
We need community to be a training ground,  
To hold us accountable for loving publicly,  
And not only in our thoughts and prayers.

In my experience of the Episcopal Church,  
Our communities honor two different beginnings::  
Advent, which is the traditionally recognized beginning of the liturgical year in the church:  
And Kickoff Sunday, which coincides with the beginning of the new school year.  
We’ve been worshiping and gathering through the summer, of course,  
but this week, we reunite as a choir,  
In childcare and Sunday School classrooms,  
In Bible Study,  
And in formation and stewardship conversations  
How can we listen to what the scriptures are saying to us today,  
at the beginning of a new program year,  
a new year of walking with each other in faith?

When Jesus heals the man who is deaf,  
He not only changes that man’s life,  
But changes the life of the whole community  
By enabling an individual who has been on the periphery

To be restored to the whole.

“Be opened,”

Jesus says.

My hope and my prayer for us this year,

Is that we will

Be opened.

As individuals walking this walk,

And as a community,

Let us always be a body willing

To widen the space for others to enter in.

Let us always be a body that strives to put faith into practice,

To bring *being* into harmony with *doing*,

Seeking to be whole.