**Faithful Works and a Working Faith**

**Text: James 2:17**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**September 16, 2018**

It was a *beautiful* fall day in southern Ontario. I was serving a church near Toronto, and I decided to go for a hike. So I got into my beat-up old Toyota and drove a few hours north through some *amazing* fall colors. The trail head was next to a community center. I parked the car in the parking lot and headed for the woods just beyond. As I came around the corner of the building I saw, parked behind the community center, an army tank! There was one soldier standing in front of the tank in full combat gear, and another well-armed guy poking his head out of the hatch. And the first soldier said, “Is it okay if we park here?”

I’m thinking, “With that kind of firepower, you can park that thing anywhere you want!” But I said, “I don’t know, I’m not from around here.” And then I said, “Are you on maneuvers.” And I’m thinking, “Please tell me that you’re on maneuvers; even if you’re not on maneuvers please tell me that you are, because the only other reason that I can think of why you’re here is that World War III has just been declared!”

“Yes,” he said, “we’re on maneuvers.” But even if he’d said something else I suppose I would’ve continued with my hike, because sometimes you just have to step out in faith; sometimes you just have to act as if things are going to work out; even if there is some international crisis that has broken out. The soldier acted as if it was okay to park his tank behind that community center. I acted as if World War III hadn’t just started. To walk by faith is to act as if things are going to work out.

Or, you could say it this way: sometimes you have to *trust* that things are going to work out. Sometimes you have to just trust that under God’s providential care, crises will be resolved and seemingly impossible situations will somehow find a solution.

And when you talk about that kind of trust, you’re getting close to what the Bible usually means when it uses the word faith. The Greek word for faith is *pistis*, and of course the New Testament was originally written in Greek, so we need to pay attention to the fact that *pistis* means trust. To have *faith* in God means primarily to *trust* in God. It *doesn’t* mean to believe certain things about God. It doesn’t mean to accept the *truthfulness* of certain *doctrines*. At least, that’s not its *primary* meaning.

We get ourselves in trouble if we think otherwise. When we think of faith as believing certain things about God – especially things that it’s very hard to wrap our minds around – we’re likely to get into the territory of the little boy in Sunday school who was asked to define faith. He said, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”

So no; faith is not primarily believing certain things about God; faith is a deep and heartfelt *trust* in God. But we’re not just talking about faith; we’re talking about *stepping out* in faith: moving ahead, getting to work, trusting that God is going ahead of you and clearing the way for great things to happen. Trusting God; and changing course, if need be, if it seems like God has changed directions and the trail has taken an unexpected turn.

Trusting God; following the leading of the Holy Spirit; going wherever God is leading, even if there isn’t a whole lot of evidence suggesting that this is the way to go. These are all ways of talking about faith.

By now it should be clear that we’re not talking about some kind of stand pat, do nothing faith. No, we’re talking about a *working* faith; a faith that moves forward, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So, to summarize: faith is not primarily assent to doctrine. It is rather a trust in God that overcomes fear and ushers forth in action.

Let me say that again: Faith ushers forth in action. Which is to say, with James, that faith without works is dead. In fact, faith without works isn’t faith; at least, not Christian faith. When we talk about being a Christian, we talk about being a follower of Jesus. Well, in my Bible, Jesus is frequently on the move: going to the next town, sailing to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, setting his face toward Jerusalem. So if the Church is going to *follow* Jesus, we have to be on the move too. *Christian* faith, by *definition*, ushers forth in *action*.

Faith without works is dead. And that’s true no matter where you are on the theological spectrum. I was at a large church meeting in Canada – somewhat analogous to a Regional Assembly – and we were discussing refugee issues. The whole assembly had been told about an individual claiming refugee status who was being held in jail on flimsy charges, and like good church folks we were all sitting around in our table groups, brainstorming what might be done about the situation – liberals are especially good about having these discussions – when all of a sudden the most conservative pastor in the room is at a microphone, asking to be recognized on a point of personal privilege, and he says, “Let’s cut all the talk and just pass the hat and bail the guy out!”

Christianity is a *working* faith. As the late UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjold said, “The road to holiness necessarily passes through the realm of action.”

Faith without works is dead. But, works without faith will kill you. It is so easy, when you get passionate about something, to want to pursue it at all costs. You may drive yourself to exhaustion pursuing that dream or trying to finish that project or helping as many people as you can. But when you do this without faith – when you do this without pausing to be refreshed by God in prayer, or checking in with trusted souls in the body of Christ to make sure that you’re on the right track, you’re setting yourself up for trouble. It’s so easy when you’re excited about something to just barrel through, full speed ahead, and think, “It all depends on me; I have to do this!”

Well guess what, folks? It *doesn’t* all depend on you. To think otherwise is to be engaged in works without faith. To be an active Christian, following Jesus, is to be engaged in *God’s* work. And if it’s God’s work, then God is calling the shots, not you. If it’s God’s work, then God will give you – God will give us – the resources to do that work. But you have to remember to check in with headquarters once and a while. You have to remember to pause and listen to God’s guidance. Otherwise you’re likely to run off, full speed ahead…in the wrong direction. Pausing, and listening, and changing direction if you have to, is what it means to be involved in *faithful* works. Hard work *without* faith tends to lead to burnout, and despair, and sometimes even death.

Works without faith can kill you or…it can cause those around you to *want* to kill you. Because, you know, if *I’ve* got to do this, if this is *my* passion and *my* project, then I’m going to drive those around me mercilessly to get on board, and nothing’s going to stop me, and pity the poor person who suggests that we ought to change course; even if that person…is Jesus.

Faith without works is dead, and works without faith may lead to your death, violently or otherwise.

The story that is coming to me is actually a Christmas story, so I apologize for not being more seasonal, but this is the story that the Spirit seems to want me to tell.

I was a junior at Hiram College in Northeast Ohio, doing some research in Cleveland and staying with friends of my parents. It was getting close to Christmas and when I finished with my research, I stayed with these folks for a few more days because my brother wanted me to pick him up in Ann Arbor on my way home to Chicago, and he couldn’t get away until noon on Christmas Eve. Well, being stuck in Cleveland for a few days, I decided to make myself useful, so I helped these folks get ready for Christmas. I helped wrap presents, and decorate the house, and we went caroling around the neighborhood. Now it’s Christmas Eve. So I head toward Chicago, pick-up my brother in Ann Arbor, we go straight to the church where we grew-up for the Christmas Eve service, and then my brother and sister and parents and I, we all head home. Now, I’ve been working real hard helping this family in Cleveland get ready for Christmas, so I’m expecting that my folks will have the tree up and decorated, with presents under it, the stockings hung by the chimney with care, and the house all nice and bright and Christmassy… I mean, that’s the way that it’s supposed to be on Christmas Eve, right?

Well; the tree was up, but there were no decorations on it, no presents under it, no stockings, no nothing. You’d hardly know that it was Christmas. And I was *ticked*! I mean, I’d been working hard to get somebody else ready for Christmas, and I just *knew* that my own home was supposed to be ready for Christmas too. I mean, that was the plan, right?! Well, my mom figured that it would be fun to wait for the family to get home, and we could decorate the tree and put up the stockings and otherwise get ready together. Now, I could’ve taken a deep breath and rejoiced in the fact that mom loved us so much that she wanted to do this as a family but NO! Things weren’t unfolding according to MY plan and I was *angry*! My mother wanted to kill me. 45 years later, I can’t say that I blame her.

If it’s *my* project, *my* plan, *my* work, then I’m going to insist that things go *my* way; even if it makes everyone around me miserable. But if it’s *God’s* work, a work in which we are engaged by faith, then maybe things are supposed to go *God’s* way. And God’s way isn’t always my way. I mean, the Holy Spirit doesn’t consult with me when he makes a decision; the Holy Spirit doesn’t ask my permission when he changes direction. And he doesn’t ask yours either! You may know just the way that something ought to be done. But God may have a different plan. Faith means trusting in *God’s* plan. I can still insist on doing things my way. I may even bully or manipulate people into doing things my way. But if I do, I’m engaging in works without faith. And that project isn’t going to end well; for anyone.

Faith without works is dead, but works without faith can kill you. The better way is to follow Jesus and be engaged in *faithful* works. That means recognizing, first and foremost, that we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Our standing before God depends not on what we’ve done, no matter how hard we’ve done it, but simply on the fact that God loves us, just the way we are. But that wondrous love that embraces us also *changes* us, and *empowers* us, and *compels* us to offer to others the same tenderness and kindness and generosity that God has offered to us. God showed no partiality when he poured out grace upon everyone, and neither should the Church. Faithful works involve not only trusting God and working according to God’s plans but also reaching out to all those to whom God has reached out. Which means…everyone. Not that any one congregation can do it all, but any congregation that *refuses* to care for folks simply because they don’t fit someone’s preconceived notion of who is worthy of the Church’s care – or God’s care – is failing to live out either a working faith or faithful works. There is a long history within charitable circles in North America of caring only for the “deserving” poor; a long tradition of turning one’s back or closing doors to the “underserving poor.” Well, that’s another example of trying to do “good” works according to one’s own plan, rather than God’s. Who am I to decide that some folks are deserving of my care, but some aren’t? Who am I to decide that some folks are to be offered hospitality, but some aren’t? And that’s true whether I’m talking about who’s allowed into the doors of the church, or the doors of the nation. God so loved *the whole world* that God sent the Son into the world. That’s John 3:16. You could look it up. God embraces *everyone*.

We humans are good about labeling certain people as “the other;” the one with whom we shouldn’t associate; the one to whom we shouldn’t offer care. But one who is engaged in *faithful* works recognizes that there is no “other;” because God loves us all.

Dr. King said, “We may have all come on different ships, but we’re all in the same boat now.” That boat may be tossed on stormy seas, but by faith we trust that somehow things will work out. That boat may require us to pull hard on the oars, because a trusting faith is a working faith. I may get the notion that I, only I, know the way ahead, but it is actually the winds of the Spirit that guide us. So stop from time to time, take a deep breath, breath in the refreshing wonder of the Holy Spirit, and then pull hard on the oars.