

Proper 18 B  
September 9th, 2018  
Mark 7:24-37  
St. George's Episcopal Church  
Fr. Chris

## **A Work of the Heart**

“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. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”

I have always been inspired by the Epistle of St. James. I think it is one of the most important books of the New Testament. It is a timeless writing that cuts to the chase about what it means to live out your Christian faith. It should not be used to judge others, but rather to measure your own personal faith and that of the community to which you belong.

Faith may come easily. By that, I mean it may be easy to give intellectual assent to the pillars of our faith. It may be easy to recite creeds. It is another matter to let those words soak in and transform you and your heart. Faith must be nurtured. It must be given a chance to grow in your heart, not just your head. The outward must turn inward and transform the substance of your life as a human being, heart, mind, body and soul. Like the character of Scrooge visited by the three ghosts on Christmass Eve night, we must dance with him as our new life dawns on Christmas morning. Scrooge was filled with joy in his soul when he saw the light and realized that it is never too late for a second chance at life. That is the message of forgiveness and redemption that Jesus preached. But Scrooge doesn't just dance on his bed Christmas morning. He is a changed man from head to toes. He acts. He puts flesh on the bones of his faith. His works demonstrate his faith. It is not about mere appearances. He has learned the lessons of life. The works that he does, show how he has changed. But those works are not about getting a reward for his generosity from others. He discovers that his generosity is its own reward, because sharing and giving his money are opportunities for him to live from his heart.

Hoarding his money and possessions has done him no good. They have isolated him from others in his life like his employee Bob Cratchit and his Nephew Fred, who are ready against all odds to love the crotchety old miser. He is now a man of substance, not shallow self-absorption.

The question is whether our faith is a matter of something on the surface, or is it part of the substance that defines who we are?

Faith in God changes us as people. More and more we discover new priorities in our living. Life is not just about us: our life on this earth is about others! Madison Avenue would have you focus on yourself: what you think you need, what you want. God wants our focus to be other-oriented instead of being-self absorbed. Love your neighbor as yourself. Unfortunately, it is too easy to misinterpret the words 'love yourself.' If you really love yourself, you will love yourself spiritually, and seek to live a healthy spiritual life that has some meat on the bones of faith. Faith is the skeleton that supports our lives. It must be incarnated, fleshed out in our work.

I am challenged by the homeless people I often see standing at the end of a highway exit seeking donations. I come up with all sorts of rationalizations as I drive on past them. But I see them. The words that come to my mind often sound like shallow excuses to me. I remember that I am a priest, whether wearing a collar or not. More importantly, I remember that I am a Christian first in everything I do, and my behavior and my works should demonstrate and show that faith to others, whether I wear a cross on my chest or arm or not. My Lord is judged by my actions, and I have a heavy responsibility not to betray God by my works. I am sad to admit, I have too often betrayed God by my deeds and by my inaction. But today is a new day, and I have another day in which I hope I will not forget who I am and whose I am, that is, who I belong to.

It is not enough to pray for someone and then do nothing, as James challenges us in his letter. Put substance on the form of those words spoken in prayer. What does that mean? Send a card to someone who is sick. Call them on the phone. Better yet, if you can, go and visit them. What have you got to give or do for one who is seriously ill? Your presence! Give your presence! Your ministry of presence means that those who suffer are not alone. You are with them, and through you, God is with them also. They are not forgotten, isolated or alone. Your presence can be very healing.

We church-goers are often accused of being hypocrites for not living by our faith and its creeds, but rather by lesser codes, unworthy of who we are. Yes, I am

human and I have failed sometimes to be the Christian I am called to be. However, I hope and pray each morning to be the Christian God has called me to be.

There are several ways for you and me to do that.

So, in order to focus on others, instead of ourselves, our eyes and ears must be open to see and hear the cries of those in need, whether spiritual or material, before we can do something about them. This is the first step. In the Gospel this morning, Jesus opens the ears of a deaf person and empowers him to speak freely, which no doubt, this healed man will use to tell the good news of Jesus. Pray that Jesus will open your eyes and ears. May the scales which keep our eyes shut to others be melted away and may our ears be opened to the truth and to the voices of others. Jesus also heals the little girl with a demon. What has that got to do with me? The worst, most insidious demon that must be slain and cast out of us, is the demon of selfishness which reeks havoc in our lives and our souls. Pray that this demon will be eradicated in your life, like the poison Round-up kills weeds and poison ivy.

Next, let it be said that you cannot earn points or salvation from your good works. Good works are never about any rewards, neither from other men and women nor from God. God does not grant brownie points for good works. But by being good people and doing good things, we grow closer to the God who is all about those sorts of things, and who has showered us with blessings and much good. Let the good works God has done in you abound in your sharing with others. If you do good to seek the praise of others on this earth, you have completely lost the point and you have turned the good works back on you and made them about yourself! There is much to find enjoyment and peace in by being and doing good.

It is very hard for us to be the good people and do the good works which our faith demands when we are all by ourselves out there in the world. Being part of a community of like-minded people seeking substance over form, will support you better than any other way I know. They will keep you honest and remind you of your calling. They will nurture you and support you. Being part of such a community is like being part of a gym for exercise, only this gym is for spiritual exercise, to really hear the words of scripture and mean the words of our prayer, by repetition to make them a part of who we are. That is the principle benefit of belonging to a church, and should be the work of our parish family gathered here every Sunday morning, AMEN.