***“A Cup of Water***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, September 26, 2021

**James 5:13–20**

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

**Mark 9:38–41**

38 John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” 39But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. 40Whoever is not against us is for us. 41For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Faith is our foundation, with God and with Jesus, faith in what is unseen, but what is *felt*, spiritually. Life tests our faith, and it can grow and mature. Faith is a noun, but in practice it is more like a verb. There are many ways we show our faith in God.

The prayer of faith is the subject of the James passage. He advocates that we pray with ardent faith, which can lead to healing, and possibly even to miracles. If we are able to call back someone who has wandered into sin, then that’s really a *moral* miracle. We have helped to save his soul. We do not need to be a spiritual celebrity to do this. Everyone is qualified to help.

So, then we get to see the apostles learning this, too. John questions whether an independent healer and preacher is qualified. He asks whether the independent healer should be stopped. John wanted to stop him “because he was not following us.” So, John thought of the Jesus movement as a controlled movement that does not allow for independent voices. Is Christianity to be a social movement that will control who is in and who is out? Not according to Jesus. “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40), he says.

He uses practical reasoning: whoever does a deed of power in his name is not going to soon afterwards speak evil of Jesus. His next remark also has to do with good deeds: “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (9:41). In other words, you will be judged by your deeds, and good deeds will indeed be rewarded. This is such good news. God honors goodness.

Just as the apostles had some misplaced ideas, Martin Luther got this one wrong. Luther taught that our deeds are all secretly selfish, and that no one really does good deeds, that we are saved by faith alone, which means confessing to certain beliefs. But we see that Jesus does not refer to beliefs at all, only to a good deed, the offering of a cup of water, and it gains one “the reward.” Despite what Luther said, you *can* do good deeds and they *do* have an effect on your salvation.

The errors that Jesus is refuting here are precisely the errors into which many churches have fallen. Some churches are dead set against independent preachers, even if they can work a “deed of power” (9:39), feeling that all preachers have to be qualified by the church. The church in this case has become an instrument of power that will decide whether something is from God or not.

Other churches think that good deeds do not matter, that salvation is strictly a matter of dogmatic belief. But James says “Faith without works is barren,” and “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:20, 24). And Jesus says that a good deed can secure salvation. Without any reference to beliefs or dogmas, Jesus pronounces someone saved on the basis of offering a cup of water. Jesus trusts the deed of power more than a decree or a dogma of the church. He trusts the kind extension of a cup of water more than he trusts dogmatic belief. Freedom from social and dogmatic tyranny comes from good deeds, and knowing that God honors good deeds. Near the end of his time on earth, Jesus said, regarding acts of goodness: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). Faith should inspire acts of goodness. We act out of the overflow of love and gratitude that is in our hearts. That love and gratitude comes from our growing understanding of God’s love for us, and from our experiencing of a circle of faith. It helps to receive some love from our fellow humans.

In 1892 two students at Stanford were having a hard time raising money for tuition. They decided to host a concert and use the profits to pay their tuition. They hired the famous pianist Ignacy J. Paderewski, whose manager insisted on a guarantee of $2000 for the performance. The fund-raiser took place, but it only raised $1600. The students handed the money over along with a promissory note of $400. But Paderewski said “that won’t do.” He tore the note up and gave them the cash and said, “take what you need for your tuition and expenses. If there is any left, keep 10% of it and send the rest to me.” The boys were able to stay in school. Years later, Paderewski became the Prime Minister of Poland, and had to help his country during a time of famine right after World War I. Paderewski reached out to the US Food and Relief Administration for help. The head there was a man named Herbert Hoover, who authorized a large shipment of grain to Poland. Paderewski decided to go and meet Hoover and personally thank him, but Hoover stopped him and reminded him of the time he had helped two poor students. “I was one of them,” Hoover said. (<https://mikeschoultz.medium.com/> helping-another-a-story-of-doing-good-deeds-47a37e84f22e).

Good deeds matter. The James text also talks about the good deed of bringing someone back to righteousness who has wandered from the truth. The prayer of faith is also a kind of good deed. Faith is not separated from good deeds. Faith *leads* to good deeds. James recommends a further action: “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (5:16). Imagine if our church’s group prayer included personal confession and repentance. It would be a very intimate group if we could do that. It would mean we were very dedicated to each other, as well as to God. The group would be an intimate, family-like gathering.

So I’m here to affirm the importance of good deeds. They matter to those who are benefitting from the good deed, and they matter to God. Even small deeds like the offer of a cup of water can be hugely valuable. They help us keep the love circulating. We can be part of that great circle of love that starts with God. Keep the love circulating in the human race so that our hearts don’t grow cold and hard.