James 2:1-10; 14-17

the evidence of faith

The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time September 9, 2018

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It is early evening when the boy sits down with his granma on the porch swing. The sun is setting and the air cooler than the heat of the day. The familiar rhythm of the cicadas surrounds them. Ever since his grandfather died, the boy has been coming over to visit. His mom brings him over while she run errands.

**What is faith**? he asks her. That’s kinda big, isn’t it? She say. I mean for me it is, anyway. He waits. The cicadas click away in the fading light. **Well** … **what is it to you**? He asks again. She is thinking of what granpa would say if he were alive. They saw things differently but the boy doesn’t know it. So she goes on anyway, “it’s kinda hard to say exactly but it’s something that carries you along, like a boat in a storm. It’s been a part of me for so long, that I can’t think about my life without faith that God is that boat that will never sink. No matter what. No matter what? He says, wondering. No matter what, she nods. God is the boat? That’s just a manner of speaking, you know. I mean that no matter I go through, even when I can’t see him, I trust that I will not sink. And there’s something else, too. I like the Psalm: the Lord is my shepherd. That brings me peace deep down; it makes my glad and happy, too. Knowing that he’s there all time like I’m a sheep and he is my shepherd. That makes me strong especially now that I’m alone.

***You’re not alone! I’m here.***

You know what I mean! Well, maybe you don’t. I mean faith to me is knowing that I’m never alone even when I’m alone. It’s like having a boat in a storm or a shepherd in a field. Remember at your granpa’s service the preacher said what Jesus’ said? **No**. Well, I didn’t think so, but still. Jesus said, don’t trouble your heart, believe in me. And he went on say about how you are never alone, even when you pass over. **Like Granpa passed over?**

Yes, like gran’pa. Anyway that’s faith to me. Jesus says don’t trouble your heart. You will never sink and you’ll never be alone. I don’t know where it comes from. Some people say it’s like a gift; it comes to you and you have to hold on with all your heart and all your mind all your days.

It was almost dark when he brings up Granpa again. **He didn’t talk much like you do.**

No he didn’t, did he? Your Gran’pa didn’t like talking about his faith, but I can tell you he had it. He knew he was in that little boat all the time. He just didn’t like to talk about it; said it was too personal. And besides, he always said, people don’t have to hear me say anything to know my faith. If they can’t see it by the way I’m living, then must be something wrong with what I’m doing. His favorite verse came from the book of James. “Show me your faith and I’ll show you my works. Because faith without works is dead.”

And your Granpa liked that old Amish farmer story. **What?** Says the boy.

Someone asked the Amish farmer “Are you saved?” The farmer looked at him and said, **“I don’t know, I think you’ll have to ask my neighbor over there. If I’m saved, he’ll know.**

They sit silently for a few moments in the dark. The stars were twinkling now. It is very quiet. Then Granma sighs peacefully, *time for bed*. The boy is now almost asleep and ready to greet his mom who waits inside.

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**James, the brother of Jesus, is a bit like the Amish farmer.** In a unequal world so arranged that wealth brings power, he says to the church, make no distinctions. Instead follow Jesus. Go out of your way to make sure that the poor are treated well. Err on the side of the loveless. Make sure there is seat at the table for those who have nothing to bring but themselves. Do for the least of your brothers and sisters as you would do for Christ. In this is our faith visible. The church is the place where Tammy, who lives in every community around the world, can hear the good news and know it is true in deed.

Someone once said to me, "***let me walk beside you for a week--live with you--and I will tell you exactly what you believe, without you ever saying word."*** He never did, but I frequently imagine him walking along beside me, a kind of invisible soul mate. *Like the presence of Jesus.* At the end of the day, the end of the week, what will he say I believe? Will my words match my deeds? Some days yes, some days no. I pray for the balance and often wish it were better. If that same companion were walking with our Church, what would he say about our faith? Would our words match our deeds?

Will your faith save you? Asks James. For Martin Luther, the very question is scandalous. Of course, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone. But what would our companion, James’ brother Jesus in disguise, say if he never saw evidence other than words, words, and more words piled on one another.  **Isn’t** ***faith is more than a pile of words?***  Luther is right: we aren't saved by our good deeds. But James is right too; ***we are saved for good deeds.*** If what you say has nothing to do with how you act, then it's all dust in the wind. Our holy, invisible companion says, ***show me your deeds and I'll show you your faith. Like the Amish farmer; if I'm saved then my neighbors will know it.***

Every day our lives proclaim what we believe. What good is it, asks James, if you say you have faith, but never show it? Is there no evidence for the faith you profess?

Honestly, I don’t like saying this because it seems to neglect the generous grace of God that saves even the worst we can be. I completely understand why Martin Luther was not a fan of James. It’s so easy to lose our only hope in the grace of God that saves us.

***Yet***, without mercy, without kindness, without deeds of love for the loveless, what is faith? It is dead. Mercy and compassion toward our neighbors, the poor, the hungry, and the neglected are the evidence of faith alive and well.

Is your faith dead or alive?

Now to the one who by the power within is able to do far more than we can ask or think or even imagine.

To God alone by the glory.

Amen.