

## 1 Sermon, August 8, 2010

Texts: James 2:14-26, Matthew 5:13-16

Title: "Scriptures to Live by: Faith and Works"

1. A Fable
2. James
3. Luther
4. Wesley

Long ago, when the world was young, God decided to create an intelligent being, one that would appreciate the goodness of God.

So God created the cat. The cat appreciated that God had given it beautiful fur, and deep green eyes, and the ability to relax in a warm place. The cat was content, luxuriating in its faith that God had created this wonderful world just for it. The cat knew that God was good, and the cat was very good at the spiritual practice of meditation.

But God became dissatisfied. The cat had faith, but it had no care for the other beings in the garden. The cat had the sin of sloth. It was lazy.

So God decided to create another animal, that would be anxious to assist the others in the garden; God created the dog. The dog was eager to please, anxious to do just what God wanted.

But God again became dissatisfied: the dog followed God around everywhere, and often got in the way. The dog was helpful, but always there looking at God, and God found it hard to concentrate.

God realized that the dog had the sin of pride. It was not content with things the way God made them, but was always wanting to change things. In fact, sometimes the dog seemed to believe that it knew even better than God. The dog kept trying to plant bones and grow it's own meat. The dog was not content that there was a squirrel in the tree, but had to keep shouting to let God know about it.

So God decided to create another kind of animal. God created the human. The human did not have the extreme sloth of the cat, nor was it as eager to please as the dog. It was somewhere in between. It had some of both sins.

This fable provides the background for today's passage from the book of James. It corresponds to the first of the multiple choice questions in your bulletin.

## 2 Sermon, August 8, 2010

"James" wrote:

My friends, what good is it to say you have faith, when you don't do anything to show that you really do have faith? Can that kind of faith save you? If you know someone who doesn't have any clothes or food, you shouldn't just say, "I hope all goes well for you. I hope you will be warm and have plenty to eat." What good is it to say this, unless you do something to help? Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead!

This quote from the Bible reading should let you know that the correct answer to number one is b. "James" was writing because some people were saying that if their heart was right, they could ignore their neighbor's need.

James writes that certain Christians are behaving too much like cats. In other words, they had faith, but not the works to back up their faith.

It's old and maybe odd language to talk about faith and works, but the problem is still there. If we emphasize "faith" too much, we may fall into the sin of laziness. If we emphasize "works" or good deeds too much, we may fall into the sin of pride.

And that's what happened in the early 1500s, when the German priest, Martin Luther, faced what's referred to in multiple choice question number 2.

Luther was deeply disturbed because the church hierarchy was misusing its power, telling people they might buy their way into heaven. The church leaders needed money to rebuild St. Peter's basilica in Rome, and so were selling the forgiveness of sin to raise money.

Far from emphasizing faith, the church leaders were emphasizing deeds. The church leaders were expecting the faithful to act like loyal dogs. And many did.

But Martin Luther wanted them to act like humans instead, and so was born the Protestant Reformation.

Two hundred years-plus later, those protestants were acting too much like cats again.

John Wesley was born into an England with huge social inequalities and the beginning of the industrial revolution. The average person wasn't working too hard on their faith. Much of the upper class was complacent, and the church structure was not sympathetic to the needs of those in the lower class.

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John Wesley had a desire to light a fire under the complacent ones, and set on fire for God those who knew nothing of faith.

John Wesley looked back to Luther — and this is number 3 on your multiple choice survey — and believed that Luther was right about our inability to earn salvation and our total dependence upon God's grace.

Wesley may not have been as fond of beer as Luther had been, but Wesley published home brewing tips.

Wesley knew how important faith was, and agreed with Luther that we are saved by grace thru faith. But he said that once we are brought to faith by God's initiative, we must do good works in order to *keep* our faith. So Wesley, unlike Luther, appreciated the book of James.

To round out question 4, Wesley may not have been as comfortable with Luther's alliance with princes, but applauded the translation of the Bible into the common language of the people.

All that brings us up to us. Faith and works is still an important issue because we are still subject to both sloth and pride.

Question #5 gets at the heart of the issue, because both a and b are somewhat correct.

We need to receive faith as a free gift, something that God has done, something that we can't earn.

But there is an element of choice in the receiving. There are things that we need to do because of our faith.

Sincere committed Christ-followers can fall into the sin of sloth, and just not work very hard on their faith. They can figure they know it all, or know enough, or that they are doing enough for the good of others. Sincere, committed Christians can get complacent.

Sincere committed Christ-followers can also fall into the sin of pride, and think that they are able to save the world, or at least their neighborhood. Sincere Christians can get paralysed by worry about whether they're doing enough to follow Jesus. Does God want me to do this particular thing or that particular thing? Does God want me to take this on, or let this go?

The sin of pride is not so much thinking that I am so great as thinking that I am really in control. Or thinking that I can really understand what God wants in each and every circumstance. It is more in the spirit of humility to realize that God points us in a general direction, but then the details aren't as important, because we don't have control over all those details anyway.

#### 4 Sermon, August 8, 2010

So, to end, I'd like to refer you to the last question on your multiple choice survey. What brings us closest to Jesus? Is it:

- a. right belief
- b. a devoted heart, or
- c. trying to live out what Jesus would do

If you answer a or b, you may be cat-like, and have a tendency toward sloth. If you answer c, you may be more dog-like, and have a tendency toward pride.

But the Good news is that we don't have to choose. Christ's love lifts us beyond the need to figure it all out. Christ's love lifts us beyond being either dogs or cats. Christ's love allows us to be people of love, and that's a beautiful, transcendent thing.

Thanks be to God!

Multiple Choice Survey:

1. James wrote about faith and works because:
  - a. Some people were trying to earn their way into heaven
  - b. Some people were saying that if their heart was right, they could ignore their neighbor's need
  - c. People were having arguments about these issues
2. Martin Luther was trying to correct:
  - a. Laziness among Christians
  - b. People's belief that they could earn or buy their way into heaven
  - c. The autocratic power of the church
3. John Wesley believed that Luther was right about
  - a. Our inability to earn salvation
  - b. Our total dependence upon God's grace
  - c. Beer being good in the morning
4. John Wesley believed that Luther was wrong about
  - a. Luther's alliance with princes
  - b. Luther's criticism of James for emphasizing good works
  - c. Luther's translation of the Bible into the common language of the people
5.
  - a. Salvation Is something that God has done, and we have no part in making it happen
  - b. We need to choose to be saved
6. What brings us closest to Jesus?
  - a. right belief
  - b. a devoted heart
  - c. trying to live out what Jesus would do