

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

29th August 2021 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

JAMES 1:22-27

FAITH IN ACTION – INSIDE OUT

A couple of weeks ago, talking about Jesus as the Bread of Life, I mentioned how throughout history people have been seeking ways to live forever, and using all sort of means to try and achieve this. I'm going to suggest that another quest people have often pursued is to try to make themselves look or feel younger. Traditionally this had led, sadly, to things like hunting rhinos to the brink of extinction because their horns are believed to give even the old a youthful virility. And many other species have also suffered from being the subject of these beliefs.

In the modern, western, scientific and affluent society we live in, this quest for either turning back the clock on our age, or holding it still, is still very much alive, and we know it is a big business today. And while I don't claim to be an expert on the anti- or reverse-aging industry (that probably won't surprise you!), it seems to me there are two ways that people approach this. One way is to work on the outside, from things like Botox and plastic surgery, to dying our hair, to using anti-wrinkle cream, to being very conscious of what we wear and the image that portrays about ourselves. And the other approach seems to focus on what we take in, and how that makes us look and feel younger. So here we have a very large vitamin and supplement industry, healthy eating and diet plans, and many other tonics etc we are invited to take in to keep ourselves both feeling and looking young.

What is more effective in keeping us both feeling and looking healthier and younger? Is it the work we do to the outside, which people see and no doubt makes us feel better about ourselves? Or the changes we make to the inside, which are obviously intended to affect our

inner physical health in a positive way which then comes out in our outward appearance? I make no judgements here, and I'm not totally immune to this quest for trying to look and feel as young as I can, but these seem to be the two basic approaches we can take to changing how we look to others.

Is it more important to focus on the outside and what is seen, or what is inside and is expected to effect real change as it comes out? This same kind of debate also comes into how people approach religion, including Christianity. As an example, we know that Jesus was very hard on some people of his day, like the Pharisees, calling them 'hypocrites' because they did all the right outward things so that people thought they were holy, but inside they didn't really have a love for God or a desire to serve other people. They had the outward appearance, but not the inner faith.

Jesus' message of love and forgiveness was taken up by the apostles, including Paul, in both their teaching and their writing. Jesus' death and rising again meant that we are now saved in no way by what we do but simply by our faith in Him; if you like, it is now what is on the inside that counts. This is what we call grace, the free gift of God's love and forgiveness, and it is the basis of our faith. It seems though that back then some people did what we humans often do, and that's to swing from one extreme to the other. While people had that faith inside of them, some were acting like now it didn't matter how they acted, what they said, how they treated others, because Jesus had died so they could be forgiven.

It's thought that this letter written by James was one of the last New Testament letters written, and unlike most of the others it's not written to a specific group of Christians, like those in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, etc, but it is a general letter to all Christians. It is a letter written with a strong purpose, as is shown by the reading we have today from chapter 1. James' strong message is that when we believe in God, that faith will come out in what we do; as Christians our faith is always in action, from the inside out.

Have a look at the words here in this reading. The letter of James is known for having a very practical approach to faith. What things do you see here which talk about what faith means for us in our lives? There is the instruction to 'listen and obey', not just 'hear and forget'. And strong words also about controlling our tongue; what we say, how we say it, do we use our tongue to build people up or bring them down, by what we say do we bring glory to God or bring shame to Him? We are called to practice our religion, that is living out our faith, in a way that pleases God by being 'pure and spotless'. And at the end here, we are told to help those people who are in need, and not to let ourselves be led astray by the world. Very practical advice.

In our service today we have had the theme verse, 'Faith comes from hearing the Word of God' (Rom. 10:17) What James is giving us now is following on from that. The strong message we are given here is that we are not to just be 'hearers' of the Word, but also 'doers'. For us the change certainly does come from the inside, but once it is there it will move out. The faith we are given isn't a pill or treatment with a 'stay young' promise which turns out to be false, but is the hope and forgiveness of God. It's a faith which James is reminding us here will come out in the things we think, say, and do.

Just have a think about that for a bit? How does our faith come out in our lives now? How does it affect the attitudes we have? How does it shape how we treat others? How does it influence our speech? How does it shape the priorities in our lives? How does it determine how we reach out to help others? These are all things which we are not going to quickly answer here, but they are the parts of our lives which we are reminded again here that we do need to always evaluate to ensure that what we believe, the faith inside of us, clearly comes to what is seen and heard outside.

Is the change that is seen on the outside, or that which happens on the inside, more important? I'm not going to answer that question for the beauty and anti-aging industry, but

what we are taught here in James and elsewhere in the Bible is that when, through faith, God's grace and love transforms us from within, that will come out in our thoughts, words, and actions. We know we won't do this perfectly, that is why we continue to need God's grace. The call though is to allow the Holy Spirit, through our faith, to continue to transform and lead us so that our faith becomes action, from the inside out. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

Be Hearers and Doers

Have another look at the words of James 1:22-27

- Are there any areas of your life which don't hold up to what we are called to do here?
- Are there things which you say or do which don't bring glory to God?
- Pray for forgiveness for any shortcomings you have here, and ask for God's help in allowing the Holy Spirit to let your faith to come out in action.

Faithful Action Towards Others

There is certainly a focus in this reading on how the way our faith comes out in our lives affects others. We know that our words can either build people up or tear them down, lead them to God or lead them away from Him.

- Think about how you speak to, and about others. Is it in a way which builds people up or tears them down?
- Consider how you help the needy. Based on both what God has blessed you with and the need which exists, do you feel that you are helping those in need in the way God asks us to do here?
- Thank God for putting each of us in a position where we can witness to Him and serve others. Ask Him to give us guidance and strength as we do this.

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