

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

8th September 2024 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 2:1-10, 14-17

FAITH LIVED OUT

Which would you say is better, or more genuine, or would you prefer to receive: words of love, or actions of love? To take it a bit further, what if the words are earnestly spoken but the actions say the opposite, or the actions suggest love and care for you but the words don't emulate that?

To fill that out a bit more: what does it mean if someone expresses their love in deep and heartfelt ways, perhaps borrowing words from Shakespeare to say, "I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest", but in their actions towards that same person they are selfish, hurtful, and cause sadness either deliberately or inadvertently. Does that person have true love?

Or, if the actions are full of generosity, care, nurture, and concern, going way above what might be normally expected, but the words hurtful, belittling, critical, spiteful, and either deliberately or inadvertently cause sadness or pain, is love being shown there?

Which of those situations shows true love? Which would you rather be the receiver of? Or is the answer, I suspect for most people, is that in neither of those situations is love being either given or received, because if love is truly felt towards another person it will transform the lover so that through both words and actions the loved will know that they are, well, loved?

How about then if we make the transition from love across to faith, which can be described in one way as knowing God's love and loving Him in return. Is having faith about the belief inside of us, or what comes out on the outside? Is it faith when we just believe, but no one else would know that? Or that we say it? Or that we do it? Which aspect is truly important in our relationship with God?

The role of inner faith on the one hand, and words and actions on the other, in our relationship with God, that is, what is most important, has always been something we've struggled to balance as Christians. 500 years ago the Church of Martin Luther's time had put the emphasis very much that whether we are saved is determined by what we do for God, in particular how much money and

service people gave to the Church. Luther and others went back to the Bible and found many teachings in books like Romans which clearly state: ‘We see that people are acceptable to God because they have faith, and not because they obey the Law.’ (*Romans 3:28 CEV*) The Bible teaches clearly, many times over, that we are saved through faith, which joins us to the forgiveness and new life Jesus won for us on the cross and in His resurrection. To bring us back to Him, to heal the rift our sin has made in our relationship with Him, God sent Jesus to pay the price for our sin, and sends the Holy Spirit to give us the faith which brings us back to Him. We are saved through faith.

But then we have teachings like the one here today from James: ‘Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead!’ (v. 17) How do we put the two together? The book of James, which contains great teachings about the Christian life, has at times been disregarded a bit because it's felt to go against other Bible teachings as we interpret them as Lutherans. Some worry that if we put too much emphasis on these teachings then we will end up putting the cart before the horse; make it more about what we do than about what God does for us.

So, where's the balance then? Is it about accepting in faith what God does for us, or about our faith being shown in the words and actions which come out? Or, is that like asking an either/or question like; is love about what is said or what is shown? Instead of the part faith plays in our relationship with God and with others being about either how we are freely forgiven and saved, or about how we now worship God and serve others, is it instead both? A great explanation I read this week of how the two fit together is that Paul, in places like Romans, emphasises the role of faith; to bring us forgiveness and new life in bringing us back to God. While other teachings like this one in James talk about the result of our faith; a changed life, that is, a life in which our faith is lived out in love for God and others. So, it's not one or the other, it is both.

Faith lived out. What does that look like then? What underlies this is that when we have faith, when we know God's love and forgiveness in our lives, we will be transformed, and that will come out in what we do or say. It's not a ‘you must do this’, but, ‘you will do this’. It's as natural as when you love someone your whole attitude and everything you say and do towards and for them will change. To lay this out for his readers James gives a very concrete example of what this looks

like. Firstly, he calls them hypocrites, because when people come into their Christian communities the believers judge the visitors and treat them differently according to how much money they have. Not only is this wrong when everyone is equal before God, but it's the rich who treat the believers badly, but who they then crawl up to, while the needs of the humble poor are ignored. Perhaps a bit of a stretch for us, but try to imagine a community, and even a Christian community, which can at times be selfish in its attitude towards others.

Instead, James writes, 'You will do all right, if you obey the most important law in the Scriptures. It is the law that commands us to love others as much as we love ourselves.' (James 2:8 CEV) Love one another as I have loved you. Love others as you love yourself. A familiar teaching, isn't it? Nothing way out or against other Bible teachings here. James is echoing the words of Jesus. In having faith which brings us to know and experience God's love in our lives, we will be transformed so that faith lived out means showing God's love out to the world.

What does this mean for us in our lives then? How does it show out? We have a very straightforward example here about how we judge and selectively accept others, an example we can probably all relate to in one way or another. But how else are we called for our faith to be lived out in what we do?

Let's go first to those closest to us; those we love and who love us, perhaps who we live with, or we are close to. How is our faith lived out in our relationships with them? Does the way we speak to them, treat them, look to their needs, forgive them, in all of those ways is the faith we have lived out, so that we love them as we love ourselves? What might we need to look at changing so that our attitude, words, and actions better match the faith we have?

How about the people in our church family, which remember in the first place is who James is writing these words to? Are we accepting of everyone, forgiving of everyone, supportive of everyone, working together in the Kingdom of God with everyone? Do we show that as a community of faith God's love is lived out as we share and live that our faith in Him transforms us, both as individuals and as a community?

And then in our wider community: those we work with, live near, socialise with. Is our faith lived out in how we treat the person who serves us at the shops, or cuts us off in traffic, or makes us take a bit longer in doing what we want to do? Do we show God's love as we work with or for people we don't agree with, or even find it hard to get along with? Is there anything in those situations, those relationships, which we need to bring to God and ask for His help with?

Very important also, what about those who are in need? Only each one of us knows how much we can afford to give in time, effort, or money, but do we see the needs around us, either locally or further away? Do we look at what God has blessed us with as being not only for our own needs, and enjoyment, but also as God supplying us with the means to be His hands of love in this world? Is it easier to look away rather than see needs? To blame others or see it as someone else's problem? To think, 'I can't fix it all for everyone' rather than seeing what we can do? Allowing the faith we have, the love of God we live in and know, to transform our hearts and our attitude, how does this come out in how we love and serve those who are in need.

We are saved and forgiven through faith in the new life and forgiveness God has brought to us in Jesus. It is a free gift from God to all who come to Him, no doubt about that. But just as sure is that as those who live in this faith, as God's people we are now called to live it out in our lives also. God has created faith in us by the Holy Spirit, in order that we might be saved and live a new life both in our relationship both with Him and with others. Faith lived out, equals God's love in action. God's love coming to us through our faith: know it, receive it, live it, each day. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Reflect on or share what your faith means to you? How does it change your attitude, your life? How does it change what you think, say, and do?
- We are saved through our faith in what God has done for us in Jesus. That is a given. But how are we now called to live out this faith in our lives in our relationship with God and with others?
- Think about the areas of your life, and the relationships, in which you struggle to always live out your faith by showing God's love in action. Hand these over to God, asking for both His forgiveness and for His strength and guidance to live out your faith each day.

Pray: thank God for the faith that saves us by His grace. Pray that our faith will be lived out in our lives as we love God and others.

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