

The Reverend Kathy Boss
All Saints' Episcopal Church
Sermon - August 29, 2021
Proper 17, Track 2, Year B
"But what about your hands"

Here, on the one hand, faith. Here, on the other, works. James was not a favorite with Martin Luther, that great protestant reformer. For Luther, the emphasis in James on being "doers" of the word had echoes of the pietistic and ritualistic trappings that he was protesting in the Catholic Church. Faith and Faith alone was what saves.

Faith.

Works.

I have, with this broken finger, been thinking a lot about hands lately. This hand and this hand. Two. We can tend to think this way--putting one thing over here, the other over here. Faith in its corner, works in the other. For a moment let's do that. Looking at each as if it is something separate from the other.

Faith according to Hebrews 11:1 "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It is a trust *in* God, and a sense of the truths revealed by God. Faith is not limited to a belief. It can fill your body with a sense of confidence that comes from knowing you matter, you are beloved. It can infuse you with compassion as you comprehend that everyone and everyone else also is a child and creation beloved of God.

Yet, we, being human as we are--separating this hand from that, these people from those, this idea from some other--we are apt to forget, to grasp for what is immediately gratifying, immediately and visibly apparent. We seek ways to set ourselves apart, apart and over.

In today's reading from Deuteronomy, Moses says to the Israelites, "But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children." Keep the faith. These laws and ordinances must be grounded in wisdom and discernment, manifesting your love of and connection to God.

And so we come to Works, but, perhaps another way to say it would be Doing, Relating.

James, in this wisdom writing, is addressing community, ekklesia, not individuals or even family units. He is addressing, from across the years, us as a religious community. Works are embedded in community--doing relating

"Be doers of the word," James says to us, "and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a

mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act-they will be blessed in their doing.”

In the doing, in our works, the manifesting of our love for neighbor, and for God in all of God’s creation and God that is, was, and will be, we resonate our faith, we look into the law of liberty and see God in everyone and everything.

These hands work together, trust and know one another because they are, in actuality, one. Faith and Works. Works are more than the manifestation of faith, they are Harmonizers with Faith, they are fruit that bears deeper faith and brings us, *us*, as communities closer to God and one another.

Jesus, in today’s Gospel, provides a scathing critique of piety for its own sake. This debate over ritual hand-washing was an active one during Jesus’ time. (“All Jews” was an exaggeration on Mark’s part, many, many Jews did not go through this ritual hand-washing before meals, including the Saducees.)

Jesus uses this debate to remind the Jewish leaders, and us, that when religion serves to set us apart and above, it is not working for us. We are succumbing to arrogance. His critique is not that they obey the laws, it is that they no longer examine their own hearts. The rituals have become a way of excluding people. Their works separate from their faith, from the law of liberty and love.

I have been going to physical therapy for this broken finger for a few weeks now. Last week, I had these passages on my mind as we worked to bend this poor finger. It is somewhat endearing to watch. For, as I try to bend that one damaged finger, the others jump in, bending in solidarity with their broken sibling, even reaching out to try and touch it and help it along. But, interestingly, the one finger that did not, or did so only half-heartedly, was my pointer finger.

It reminded me of that old saying, when one finger points at another, three are pointing back at you. Follow those three fingers. “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.”

If you point, point not to others, but to God. Works and Faith are in and of God. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” And then follow those fingers back to see what it is your faith asks of you, your God asks of you.

We must measure our lives by God’s gifts, not human possessions--by our relationships, by a dance of faith and works where one deepens and strengthens the other and, indeed, shows, not arrogance, not avarice, not separation, but wisdom, discernment, and love to those who see our church, our ekklesia, in action.

So, I ask this week, how will OUR, faith and works as a church, augment, deepen and shape one another? What do they demand of us as we face our neighbors, our brothers and sisters from Afghanistan in such dire need? What do they ask of us as we see our neighbors right here in Grafton and Coos county in need?

We must continue to, start to, and always, as a faith community, as Christians, as Episcopalians, respond to need, become doers who hear and live the law of liberty, visible and faithful lovers of God and neighbor--hands working together, fingers pointing not in blame or accusation, but in acknowledgement that this, all of this, is a gift, a gift from our amazing and beloved God.