

Sermon “Living Faith”
Kirk of St James
Sunday September 8th, 2024
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

If I told you, it was a special week in our household last week you would be right to assume it was because Grayson started school. However, if you were to ask Chad it would also be because football season started. He has been trying to start easing me back into sports season the last couple weeks reminding me of what nights have games and when he hopes to have the television to himself. Chad is a lifelong diehard Dolphins fan, and I am used to the ups and downs of the season! It is actually why I finally purchased noise cancelling ear plugs. I can put those babies in and not hear anything else the rest of the evening. Missed catch? Excellent touchdown? Does not matter.

As people we all have things we are partial too. It might be a sports team, certain hobbies, opinions and beliefs, foods, and even how we recharge in our personal lives. Some of us are introverts and some are extroverts. Naturally we all have things we prefer; it is part of how we form our identity as an individual. And nine times out of ten those preferences are perfectly harmless. When James makes the statement that being partial is a sin, he is talking about far more than whether we prefer tea or coffee.

James is watching the early Christian movement; he is observing how the teaching of Jesus are unfolding and the impact it is having. Not to mention this was a time when it was still illegal to be a Christian, and persecution was a looming possibility, whether that was through the court system, prison, or even public execution in the arena. How the first Christians put their newfound faith and belief into practice was of utmost importance. They did not have the benefit

of a Bible, with everything laid out and organized because it simply did not exist yet. There were teachings that could be shared (for example fragments have been discovered on ancient papyri), there was the knowledge of the Torah, and then oral tradition. As groups of believers formed and then tried to live out this new faith known as Christianity there was a lot that could keep it from gaining traction.

There was no shortage of gods or beliefs in the ancient world. In fact, as Paul tells it there were even altering to unknown gods in case, they accidentally missed one. For early Christians as they met and worked out what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and how that impacted the way they lived and interacted, there was the danger of a multitude of groups and believers lacking a cohesive set of beliefs.

In the Old Testament, when the Israelites were formed as a nation, they had prophets who would call them to repentance when they moved away from what God had called them to be. Whether that was idolatry, complaining, lack of faith, or beginning to follow other gods the prophets spoke truth to them, so they could come back to the heart of who they were as God's people. During the time of Jesus, it was through his teaching and example that people began to learn about this next part of God's covenant. Jesus called the Pharisees to account, flipped tables when people were found taking advantage of others, and forgiving sins and healing when needed. After the death of Jesus, it was through the work of the apostles that the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrections continued to spread. Wherever the apostles travelled small groups of believers began to crop up however, as humanity is apt to do these communities would sometimes move away from the core beliefs that formed them. Therefore, we have the pastoral letters, that were written to these groups to encourage them during difficult time, to

rebuke when they were arguing, and to call them account if they were not acting as they should. That is what James is looking at this morning.

Even in the early days of this movement he saw people showing preference to those with social prestige and failing to love one's neighbour as oneself. N.T Wright speaks of how, "This is what James means at the end of the previous chapter by not letting the world leave its dirty smudge on you. The world is always assessing people, sizing them up, putting them down, establishing a pecking order. And God, who sees and loves all alike, wants the church to reflect that generous, universal love in how it behaves." As the prophets of old often did, James calls this congregation out on its failure to live the gospel as they should. When James makes the comment that "they have made distinctions among yourselves" the original wording meant "to face both ways" or "to be internally divided." This particular community had begun to divide the community along the lines of wealth and poverty. When people walked into their worshipping space the person on the door was judging them by how they looked. If you were dressed nice and showing a bit of bling you got the good seats. And if you were dirty, had no money in your pockets, or coming straight from work you might not even be provided a seat. This goes against everything Jesus taught.

"James makes a theological point that may become for us, the starting pointing point for pastoral care. That starting point is agape love, which enables us to bear one another's burdens under the most trying of circumstances...here pastoral care, Christian ethics, and moral responsibility are joined." As we spoke about last week a faith full of empty words is not worth much. Everything that Jesus taught us, and that James exhorts us to is a love and faith that

embraces everyone, and wherever there is injustice, or places where the vulnerable need help, we are called to act.

Our faith is not passive, it is alive in the holy spirit and meant to not only be heard but also to be put into practice. I love you as a congregation for a million different reasons but, one of those is because you love the world around you. You stay aware of importance issues; you try to find ways we can help and fill in the gaps where people might be struggling or needing help. You are constantly asking questions and reaching out. It is incredibly easy in today's world, to turn inward, not even maliciously but because figuring out how to live in a world that appears increasingly disinterested in faith can be difficult and also vulnerable. However, this congregation committed itself to engaging and caring for others, and you have not been afraid to wrestle with difficult questions.

Within the month there will be a survey going out to our congregation as a way of giving people the chance to offer additional feedback on how we see moving the mission of the church forward. We had a wonderful meeting in June that offered the chance for an initial round of feedback and discussion, and this is an opportunity for any other thoughts to be shared. I know the session is excited to see what is next, and I hope you are feeling the same.

I am going to leave you with a few words from N.T Wright, "Translating belief into action, even when it seems impossible or downright dangerous. That is the faith that matters. That is the faith that justifies. That is the faith that saves. This is near the heart of the message of James: the challenge to make sure that faith is the real thing, that it does what it says on the packet." May the wildly creative, living, miraculous faith our Lord blow through our lives, and give us hope and strength.