

WGUMC September 2, 2012 "Work without Faith"
James 1:19-25; 2:14-18

During the opening prayer, I had you look at your hands. We can tell a lot about who a person is and the work they've done just by looking at their hands. All their callouses, their scars, their rough or smooth, dry or papery-thin skin: by their hands, we shall know them.

Reminds me of the saying, "by their fruits ye shall know them." [Matthew 7:20] When Jesus said that, he wasn't talking about apples and oranges. He was talking about the work of their hands, the results of their labors, the fruits of their faith. In other words, what we do tells people who we are and what we believe.

Today is the Lord's Day and tomorrow is Labor Day, so what better day to talk about how our faith is connected to our work. It just so happens that our lectionary gives us the Letter of James for the next several weeks. The author of this letter was a bit of an expert on faith and works.

James has gotten a bad name. Martin Luther didn't like this letter. He called it an "epistle of straw." And that's because Luther thought that James put too much emphasis on doing good works and not enough on having faith. But John Wesley thought and I agree that old Luther was just misreading what James was saying. Faith is foremost, but it isn't real faith if it doesn't produce good works. "By their fruits, ye shall know them."

Despite what Luther thought, when it comes to faith and works, James has our Lord and Savior on his side. Many times, Jesus talked about faith not as something you have but something you do. For Jesus, faith is a verb. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Abba in heaven." [Matthew 7:21] Also in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved

you...You are my friends if you do what I command you." [John 15:12, 14] The First Letter of John echoes Jesus: "Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments is a liar and, in such a person, the truth does not exist." [1 John 2:4]

So, it's pretty clear. Faith is not something you have. It's something you do. So what is it that the author is concerned that we do? We'll be looking at this question for the next four weeks because James is a primer on Christian ethics. On the to-do list for this week is: supply the needs of the poor. That was a major concern in early Christianity and ought to be one today. "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"

Every time I stop and talk to a homeless person and give them a dollar and God's blessing, I think of that verse. It's not

that I don't have the money, it's that I don't have the time to supply what they really need: on-going support, counseling, housing, job training and employment, education and health care. We have all those things. We know a lot about getting them. But we lack the time to share that knowledge and to produce that fruit.

As I was mulling over this problem, the question that came to me is this: how can we Christians do good works when we are always at work? The author of James says, "Faith without works is dead." But I say, work without time for practicing our faith is deadly.

It's the 21st century, and we try not to think about how deadly our work has become in this valley. Nationwide, 70% of children live in households where all the adults are employed. Over eighty-five (85.8)% of men and over sixty-six (66.5)% of women work longer than 40 hours per week. I bet the percentages are even higher here. It's pretty grim. Americans

on average work 137 hours more per year than Japanese workers, 260 hours more than British workers, and 499 hours more than French workers. We won't even get into comparisons of paid vacation, sick leave and parental leave.

Like many of you, I cherished the vacation I had this summer, camping off the grid in far northern California and Oregon. One of the CD's we took along was a collection of Woody Guthrie songs. He would have been 100 years old this year. The scary thing I discovered listening while driving is that the songs he sang about the drought and the Dustbowl and the foreclosures and unemployment lines and labor struggles seem as relevant today as they did in the 1930's. We've mostly forgotten his songs. The one we know best is "This Land Is Your Land," but we don't even know the best verses. Do you know this one: "In the square of the city/in the shadow of the steeple/by the relief office/I saw my people/As they stood there hungry/I stood there asking/Is this land still made for you

and me?" That one hits a little close to home. But the causes that Woody sang about, that our parents or grandparents fought for and sometimes died for (like the 40-hour work week), seem like lost causes today.

Yet, when all of our work goes into just supplying our own needs and we have no time for others' needs, what is the good of that? While we are working ourselves to death, our spirits are dying, too. Faith without good works is dead. Work without time for practicing our faith is deadly.

Sometimes, we wish we could start over and make different choices. Ahh, to be young again. Well, John Brewer is young. He plays the guitar for our early service. He didn't have a full-time job, a family or a mortgage to tie him down, so he spent several weeks working on staff at a Next Step mission site in Mississippi. The Bible verse he took with him on his trip: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." [James 2:17]

John came back to San Jose a few weeks ago and told us about his experiences this morning. I want to read a bit of what he sent to me:

For the first several days I was back in San Jose, all I wanted to do was get back to Mississippi because I had a sense of belonging and purpose there. I then began asking myself why was it so different there, and how can I bring Mississippi to San Jose instead.

He goes on to talk about the work they did, the prayer time, the devotions, the worship. For him, it was just like the early Christians. So coming home, he was in culture shock. This is how he describes it:

Staying at a church in a far away place for 9 weeks puts some perspective on things, about what we take for granted every day, and how much STUFF we have. I was living out of a suitcase, and by world standards was still well off...electricity and running water? I'd say I'm blessed. It's just a little switch you've got to flip, and then have another look around.

For John, the trip was life changing. He's now boxing up stuff he doesn't need to give away. And he's rereading those verses in the Bible that warn us about loving the world more

than we love God. Here's one he passes along:

1 John 2:15-17 (ISV) “Stop loving the world and the things that are in the world. If anyone persists in loving the world, the Father's love is not in him. For everything that is in the world—the desire for fleshly gratification, the desire for possessions, and worldly arrogance—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world and its desires are fading away, but the person who does God's will remains forever.”

I celebrate what God is doing in John's life. And I refuse to believe that our God is not powerful enough to do the same in our lives, even if we aren't young and unattached and unencumbered. More than a mortgage, what we all need is some time in Mississippi.

But I know a way that we can get there without ever leaving Silicon Valley. Next Sunday, after church, we can drive all the way to Almaden Hills and learn about The Open Table. What you will hear about is a new way of supplying the needs—the physical, emotional and spiritual needs—of the poor. It's the ultimate hands-on, hearts-in way to practice a living faith. There is no need to go far away in order to bear much fruit.

The blessing of this work is so immediate and abundant that anyone who wants to can make the time to make a difference.

Look at your hands. Look into your hearts. Listen for the implanted word, the word that has the power to save your soul.

And then be doers of that word and not hearers only. So be it.

Go to it.