September 16, 2018
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Faith may be the most slippery word in our Christian vocabulary. We say it so easily…. We talk about “the” faith referring, I suspect, to a body of beliefs captured in the creeds or a one-liner learned years ago.

When someone is going through a difficult time, we may offer encouragement by saying, “Just keep the faith” as if that in itself might be a cure. We have faith in each other, our employers, civic institutions, and yes, God’s Church… even in these shocking days. All this begs the question: What is faith? And if we could come to a common understanding of its definition, what would it mean as we order our lives and live our days?

Jesus has come to the mid-point in his public ministry. As St. Mark tells it, things have moved very quickly from his baptism… to the desert’s temptation …to the calling of disciples to… parables, miracles, and other mighty works. Now he takes his closest followers away for a few days of retreat. They hike north, into what we call the Golan
Heights, to Caesarea Philippi. Many would have made this walk in our Lord’s day, because it was believed to be a place of spiritual renewal.

There, away from the crowds, Jesus asks, “Who do people say I am?” His men offer a handful of answers like Moses, Elijah, perhaps one of the prophets. He then asked a more pointed question: “Who do you say I am?” Not surprising, Peter, the big fisherman, blurted out, “You are the Christ! The Son of the living God!” Our Lord’s commends his number one disciple only to reveal to all of them what being the Christ would require. He spoke of suffering and rejection and, in the end, his own death. His predictions shook the disciples to their core.

In this very familiar Scriptures, Jesus tells his disciples… and us!... that faith’s confession of him as the Christ, God’s only Son, has embedded in those very words the genesis of suffering love and sacrificial death. St. Peter’s confession is also ours. We do believe Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ; he is the Son of the living God. That’s the
core, the very center of “the faith” even as we admit we have little idea what it all means.

What is faith? Decades pass. Our Lord’s prediction of his arrest, rejection, suffering, death and resurrection are now memory made present in the early Church’s life and liturgy. Jesus is now the risen Lord. With the coming of the Holy Spirit in power at Pentecost, the small community of first disciples has grown into thousands. House churches have sprung up across around rim of the Mediterranean Sea, even into North Africa. Though still considered a sect of Judaism, the Christian movement is finding its own voice.

One of those early voices is the person who wrote the Letter of James. Scholars have attempted to identify this early Christian pastor but so far … we really don’t know. To be sure, he was someone who knew Jesus of Nazareth in his public ministry. Whether he was the son of Joseph the carpenter, growing up in the same household with Jesus, remains debatable. One thing is certain: he felt the need to speak to what
seemed to be a growing misunderstanding of what it means to have faith. Was faith a body of beliefs one understands? Or, was faith the expression of one’s understanding in acts of mercy and deeds of care?

Martin Luther did not care for this letter. He called it “an epistle of straw” believing James opposed St. Paul’s insistence that “We are saved by grace through faith; not by works lest anyone should boast.” Though James and Paul probably never read each other’s writings, Luther saw a division in the early Church and sided with Paul. Christianity’s core tenet, insisted Luther, was an awareness that salvation was all God’s doing. No works, no penance, no acts of mercy or good deeds could earn God’s saving grace.

Let’s take a little time out. Did Paul teach that our Christian faith was untethered to works? Was Luther correct or was he over-reacting? Is faith something we believe in our hearts or is faith tangible, visible behaviors bearing witness to the risen Lord? Are Paul and James in a
centuries old conflict with each other? We are back to the question:

**What is faith?**

St. Peter’s confession and our Lord’s telling his disciples of his suffering, death and resurrection tell us faith is **both what we say and what we do**. The Bible from the opening lines of the Book of Genesis teach that when God spoke, all creation came into existence. Those first lines in Genesis say repeatedly, “And God said . . . let there be light, let there be heaven and earth, let there be morning and evening,” and “let us create humankind.” God’s “word” has within itself the power to effect God’s will. The Bible clearly teaches that **words are tied to actions**.

Our confession of faith in Jesus as Lord has within it power and purpose. Once those words cross our lips, a life of faith, grace, love and generosity follows. As James said, “To say ‘I have faith’” empty of Christian deeds is to negate the entire witness of God’s Word. Had our Lord only talked of suffering, rejection, death and resurrection and never offered his life in love for us, there would be no Christian faith. We
would have a book full of stories that would be nothing more than fables and narratives. His words, however, became his mandate. What is faith? Jesus’ life, death and resurrection speak with power that faith is a way of life rooted in sacrificial love.

James picked up this Gospel reality reminding his congregation that the world will only be changed when we act on what we believe. In no way did James oppose Paul’s understanding of salvation by grace through faith. In fact, if we read Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians carefully, we hear echoes of James: “For we are saved by grace through faith, not of works lest anyone should boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works”.

What is faith? Faith’s beginning is an awareness that God loves us, that we are saved by grace. Living in that holy awareness of God’s love thrusts us into the world as God’s agents for good.

What is faith? For us in the 21st century, in a leadership culture that seems unmoved by the real Christian story and even cynical about the
Christian Church, faith must move beyond what we say into action by what we do. Faith must move us from confessing a creed … to our unified investment to shed light in the dark corners, to mend broken relationships, offer food and shelter to the most vulnerable, to being a people of hospitality and acceptance, actually?… to demonstrate by our words and lives that …. the way of love is the way of life.

What is faith? Faith will become for you and me what God’s will is for all the world… because He sent his only Son to be our Savior.

When what we believe in our hearts finds its life in what we do with our hands and feet, our time and money. When that happens, then faith will live in ways never imagined before. And the Lord God sure knows we need Faith these days!