Sermon: September 9, 2018 – James 2: 1-10, 14-18
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

When my kids were teenagers, a conversation game called “would you rather” started to be popular – shared between friends, or on one of those days when the teacher wanted to give the class a fun break. Basically, it is what it sounds like: two scenarios are proposed, and you need to choose which one you’d rather have, then say something about why.

- Some were good ice breakers, like “would you rather never be able to shout, or never be able to whisper?”
- Some were silly, like “would you rather be a pirate with no ship, or a ninja with noisy shoes?”
- And some went a bit deeper, like “would you rather have one wish granted to you today or three wishes granted in ten years?”

Today we’re spending time with a reading from the book of James, including the memorable line, “Faith without works is dead.” These were intended to be provocative words from the moment they were written, and they’re getting quite a bit of traction lately, especially from folks who have ended their relationship with the institutional Church, or folks who still appreciate the communal aspect of Church but identify as post- or non-theist. And what I’m hearing, is a growing trend to latch on to these words in a particular way – as if James were playing a game of “would you rather” with us: “Would you rather have a deep faith that makes you feel close to God, or do things that make life more rich and sustainable for others?”

The answer, not surprisingly, comes back strongly in favour of doing things that lessen the burdens carried by others. And if one wishes to find Bible verses in support of this, it’s not hard to find in the writings of the prophets: Micah’s words, “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) – or Amos’ harsh declaration, [God says] “I despise your religious festivals… But let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like a ever-flowing stream!” (Amos 5: 21-24)

If we were playing “would you rather,” God’s own choice would lean in this direction: in favour of people in need. But the important thing for us to note, as individuals, as congregations, as a denomination, is that neither the writer of James, nor the prophets of old, ever intended this to be an either/or. This is not a dualistic competition between belief and action, between faith and works. No, this entire passage begins with the assumption that since we have found a connection with the Divine in our lives, we cannot just hoard it; we need to figure out how that amazing gift can shape our relationship to the world around us. Or, to apply Christ’s two-fold great commandment (Matthew 22: 36-40), whether we begin by showing compassion to our neighbour, or begin with devotion to God, a full life includes both.

An analogy here, would be a desire to be healthy human beings. It begins with a basic belief, mindset or intention, that being healthy is a good thing. Then, there are any number of components that go into that: nutrition, exercise, sunshine, friendships, keeping our minds active, getting enough sleep, and so on. No reputable source would ever suggest that our quest for health would be best-served by doing only one of these and eliminating the rest. Similarly, in James’ understanding, faith and works are both/and rather than either/or, travelling side-by-side in the life of love, both making key contributions to being the body of Christ in the world. With the exception, perhaps, of those who have chosen a monastic life, there’s not much argument to be made for putting 100% of one’s efforts into Faith or Works, at the exclusion of the other.

Now clearly, in James’ time and place, things had got out of balance. Christianity was still young and very much in danger of being extinguished by Rome, yet even then it had started to drift away from sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with all people, regardless of their
station in life, giving preferential treatment instead to wealthy patrons who would help them pay the bills. Such things happen when you get a group of humans together. There may also have been some self-preservation going on here: by paying honour to the wealthy patrons, perhaps they were buying a bit of a buffer between them and their Roman overlords? Furthermore, the Church had, as the Church does from time to time, lapsed into platitudes in its dealings with the poorest of the poor. Quoting verses 15-16 in today's reading, “if a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” James confronts the community of faith, saying that faith wasn’t the whole story; in order to live lives aligned with the good news of Jesus Christ, they had to do as he did, and get up close and personal with the hurting, the excluded, those whose lives were lived in tough places. He challenges them to re-integrate their faith and their works, as described in verse 18: “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” That’s not a call to abandon faith, but rather, an insistence that we embody our faith in lives of service. James does not give them an easy out by presenting them with an either/or choice; he insists on both/and, good works done as an expression of life-shaping faith.

That’s what James was saying, in his context, a context which, like our time and place, had people of a variety of cultural and spiritual backgrounds coexisting with varying degrees of success. There is, however, one place where our context is different enough from his that I would suggest a bit of an update, or “re-contextualizing.”

In her book, Christianity after Religion, Diana Butler Bass points to a shift in North American society. There was an old pattern by which people used to become Church members – and, to a degree, members of any formal organization - back in the days when community-based organizations, including the Church, had high participation. It went like this: 1.Believing 2.Behaving 3. Belonging. You’d begin by stating a belief in approved creeds and dogma – then demonstrating your desire to belong to the community, by following the rules, and learning any Churchy “techniques” needed in order to fit in, and then proceeding to “belonging”, being received into full adult membership of the Church. That pattern, of what’s been described as “getting the answers right, living by the rules, and passing the test”, peaked around 1964 or 1965, according to Canadian Church statistics shared by Rev. David Ewart. And in each year since then, Church participation has diminished; and in the midst of the statistical decline, a new pattern has started to emerge, which is the opposite of the old way: Belonging first, then Behaving, then Believing.

In this new way, believing, behaving and belonging are still important but their emphasis changes from ‘what you believe’ to ‘how you believe’, from ‘following the rules’ or taking on a formal responsibility at Church, to ‘the way you relate to others’; from ‘what is your membership status’ to ‘who are you’?” People come, get involved, make friendships, engage in meaningful activity, and that acts as a portal to deeper understandings of self and God. As a denomination, this switch in understandings of what membership means and how you get there is a real “work in progress”, with the most recent General Council split pretty much 50/50 on this topic, but we would be foolish indeed if we did not pay attention to what Dr. Butler Bass is saying. We need to respect a variety of entry points, and be able to welcome participation in whatever order it unfolds. Just as James urged, living the love of Christ Jesus has an active component as well as a faith component, and in the year 2018 the willingness of a Church to welcome, care for and be changed by diverse groups within its surrounding community, and to invite new ways to gather in the presence of Spirit, are ways we open ourselves to new life in Christ. Faith — that is, trusting that one’s life is held lovingly by the Divine — is still foundational, but what will be seen by newcomers long before that, is a lifestyle that embraces and embodies those deep beliefs by making a concrete difference in the lives of others.
In preparing for today’s service, I did something I almost never do: I looked back at what I had preached three years ago, when this same set of lessons showed up in the weekly lectionary. And I was reminded of that heartbreaking time three years ago, when the lifeless body of little Alan Kurdi washed ashore in Turkey. The sermon wondered aloud how we could address the needs of such a world, and within a month the Bow Valley Syria Refugee Committee was born. I remain so proud of this congregation and this community, in working together to address that need, and it underlines for me what James was getting at. Our belief that Jesus wants and promises a better world spurred us to take tangible steps to bring that love forward, and the results have truly been a blessing to the Bow Valley – it has been such a gift to have the K---- family in our community, and we remain “in process” with the T---- family: they remain in Malaysia and we continue to do what we can at this end. There are so many ways, big and small, that our belief – our trust that the bold, inclusive worldview of Jesus is of God – can turn into important actions. Some of those are big projects costing tens of thousands of dollars, some of them are actions as small as breaking the bread, and sharing the cup, a sacramental act that embodies our remembrance of the generous spirit of Jesus.

So may that intention of integration be our way forward, in our worship this morning, and out there in the world when we leave this place. For indeed, James, you were right: Faith without Works is dead – each needs the other to complement it. A healthy, hearty soul can bring forth helpful spiritual constructs, as well as selfless works for the greater good; and we welcome that fullness in the choices of our individual lives and in our gathered life as a community of faith. May this be so, Amen.

References cited:

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When I started tickling her back, she started to moan and said she was sensitive there. Awkward drive home.

I had this friend that while having long phone call sessions, she used to talk to me in this seductive sounding Colombian accent and called me _bizcocho_ witch is cake in Spanish. Never thought being called a dessert would be hot or maybe I™m just weird. I prefer giving gifts that show my love and care for that person, for example, handmade ones. Another answer: I don™t like sending some gifts that cost me an arm and a leg. Someone think expensive gifts are the representation of our sincerity, but If you buy something that makes you nearly broke (I™m broke), the receives will feel sad, which is not what you want to see, right??

Another answer: To be honest, cigarettes and wine are the most popular gifts in Vietnam. Even if we don™t smoke or drink alcohol, but someone else does, then we will definitely send them to show our sincerity. **Or maybe it just means that they want something in return! I prefer to give rather than receive. I love the look on someone's face when they open a present. I also like to make things for people. Clean would you rather questions are a fun and interesting tool to have on hand because as we all know: Sometimes it's tough to come up with a conversation topic. These handy would you rather questions solve that common dilemma. Some of them are fun, some are hilarious, and others are downright impossible. Laughing with your friends is what life's all about. When it comes to would you rather questions, funny ones often lead to further hilarious conversations. Follow the rabbit hole down the laughter path and see how far it can take you. Here are 15 clean, incredibly funny would you rather questions: 16. Would you rather find five dollars on the ground or find all of your missing socks? Use these questions when you really want to get the other person thinking. Although the image persists that youngsters would rather text than talk, and prefer Facebook than in person, Boyd says this isn™t true. Most of the teens that I met were for the opportunity to leave their homes to gather with friends, she writes. The trouble is that in many communities, young people have less freedom to roam than they once did as they are so and because parents are worried about their safety. The era of being able to after school so long as you are home before dark is long over, Boyd claims. One way or another, teens want to gossip, complain, compare notes, share passions and joke around, Boyd adds. They want to be able to talk among themselves even if that means.