

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

One complaint I've heard leveled against Christianity (mostly Protestant Christianity) is that it is too abstract, all that talk about grace and faith — at least, that's how I characterize the complaint. We have taken a religion, which is supposed to be about doing, so the argument goes, and made it into a religion of believing only, without any concrete actions expected. I'm thinking, for example, of someone like Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun who rejected Christianity and became a critic of it. She is reported to have said, "Religion isn't about believing things. It's ethical alchemy. It's about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness and sacredness." I've heard interviews with her where she has said similar things.

And then we hear James tell us today in verses that some Lutherans want to ignore that "*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ... Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*" And although we need not be, we act a bit embarrassed because Luther called James an "epistle of straw" because, he said, "it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it" (Luther's Works, 35:362). Luther's opinion in part reflects the early church's view of the Epistle, too, classifying it among the books without universal acceptance in the church. More recently, our own David Scaer redeemed the Epistle's author, praising him as "an apostle of *faith*" (Scaer, James the apostle of FAITH, 15). And he asserts that James' point is not to elevate works over faith but to demonstrate a living faith by the evidence of works. "***Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.***" Christian faith is an enacted faith! It does things! It fulfills the law. (LW, 35:369).

Now Luther speaks highly of faith. You know that well. Consider these words of his: "Faith... is a divine work in us that changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12–13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; it brings with it the Holy Spirit." Again, Luther says of faith: "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work that the Holy Spirit performs in faith" (LW, 35:370-1). This is our salvation; this is how we are declared righteous; it's a gift of God, through faith in Christ Jesus, not by our own doing, not by works for "*by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight*" (Rom. 3:20).

But that doesn't mean that Luther shuns works or avoids talking about them. Quite the opposite. He talks about them most glowingly — in fact, I think, almost

like James does, though a bit more verbose. “O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith,” Luther says, on the one hand, positively about Christian works. “It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them.” And like James, on the other hand, negatively about them, “Whoever does not do such works ... is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.” Again, “Because of [faith], without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire” (LW, 35:370-1). For Luther, too, Christian faith is an enacted faith.

And that is in part also because of who Jesus is, and what He demonstrates to us. He puts His words into action; He puts the prophet’s words into action.

Now let me remind you: a couple weeks ago, we heard Jesus quote the prophet Isaiah, “*their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (Mark 7:6-7). Of course, Jesus accomplished these words as He called out the Pharisees’ hypocrisy and rebuked them for their promotion of traditions over the word of God. “*The wisdom of their wise men shall perish,*” the prophet continued, “*and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden*” (Is. 29:14). Jesus puts these words of God into action.

Indeed, Jesus continued to enact the prophetic word that said, “*I will ... do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder*” (Is. 29:14); and “*in that day, the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see*” (Is. 29:18). Or in our Old Testament lesson for today: “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*”

Jesus enacted these words, traveling to the region of the Decapolis on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. There He here encountered a man, both deaf and mute, just the one on whom to instantiate the prophetic word. Of course, we don’t know why this man suffered in this way; if he had done something to cause it. It doesn’t matter; our every corruption is because of sin. But Jesus is the remedy.

“Lay your hands on him,” the people implored. Jesus did. He put His fingers in the man’s ears and touched the man’s tongue with His spittle — acts of compassion from the Compassionate One. “*Ephphatha!*” He said to the man. “*Be*

opened.” And his mouth and ears were — a word enacted; a good work. Indeed, the people proclaimed, Jesus *“has done all things well.”*

Last week, you remember, too, that Jesus taught us about our sinful hearts from which spew forth our uncleannesses. You remember the list of our filthiness. Thus, in our Gospel, when Jesus goes off to the Gentile land of Tyre and Sidon, and wanted to remain hidden, perhaps hoping for a bit of rest, but then is confronted with a Syrophenician woman, He had an opportunity to enact what He Himself had taught. I mean, by Jewish law, this woman was an unclean Gentile, and what’s even worse, she had a daughter besieged with an unclean spirit.

Would Jesus cast this woman aside as a dog, as one unworthy of *“the children’s bread”*? Would He, who by His blood cleanses us from our sins, leave this woman in hers? He would not. He would not show partiality against this Gentile woman who feared Jesus and rightly cried out to Him for mercy. And so He Himself would show this woman that she by faith was acceptable in God’s kingdom. He, who was *“faithful and just, [would] forgive [her her] sins and ... cleanse [her] from all [her] unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). And He would take her daughter filled with an unclean spirit and make her clean. *“For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”*

Dear saints, what Jesus would soon do on the cross, He **came** to do, and He did it to fulfill the Father’s will, the Father’s word. His love was not an abstract love, but one that effected our salvation concretely by His cross, and He still loves us concretely by His Spirit as He calls us to faith. Our faith, therefore, cannot be abstract either, but must be a “living, busy, active, mighty thing,” as Luther said, a faith enacted concretely in acts of love for one another. Yes, we are called to demonstrate our faith by doing *“good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith”* (Gal. 6:10).

God grant us that faith that enacts the love that Jesus showed to the Syrophenician woman, to the deaf and mute man, to many others, to the world, and so to us. Yes, may others see our faith-inspired good works, that all glory may be given to our God in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.