

Homily: “Faith and Works” Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman
Delivered at the Unitarian Church of Calgary, May 2nd 2010

Do you remember last Thursday, when the snow fell in big soggy flakes, and then the wind blew hard from the north?

On my way home that day I saw a big spruce tree blown down on its side, its poor root ball ripped right out of the sodden earth. There was all that sail area of tree branches catching the wind above ground, and not much tree below ground to hold it firm. We need both roots and wings to keep us steady when we are shaken by the storm. We need both.

That tree reminded me of the perennial debate between works and faith.

Some have said that we are preserved in right relation with the holy by faith alone—that good works are not enough.

By works is meant not just our labour at home and in the world, but also specific good deeds, like founding a hospital, mowing a neighbour’s lawn, or that list of donations in the tax return some of us might have slipped in the mail a hair before midnight Friday night!

The letter of James, which we heard earlier, lifted up another view, that faith without works is dead.

Now, I do not believe that those who see us preserved by faith alone mean to offer us cheap grace and a free ride through life; we are still obliged to live up to the golden rule; we are still obliged to do justice, show mercy, and walk in humility as peacemakers through this world.

I believe that those who see us preserved by faith alone mean that we can’t buy our way into right relation with the holy and our best selves. We can’t just write a cheque to make everything ok. British Petroleum can’t just write a cheque to make it ok that their massive oil leak is about to devastate the great wetlands of Louisiana. There’s more to it than that.

And I do not believe James thought that by doing good works we could buy our way into right relation either. Rather, I believe that James meant we should act on our beliefs—that we should walk the talk.

This wrestling between faith and works, thought and deed, is an old struggle, and a complicated one. Even when we act with good intentions, we are liable to reap unintended consequences. Time and time again I find I may have done a good thing and a poor thing and it’s the same thing. Each of my virtues may become a vice if I take it to excess. Each vice, in small quantity, may be timely and appropriate in some context. For

example, an excess of pride is no virtue; but a just and modest pride in our achievement can help us accomplish great things.

Similarly, patience is counted as a virtue, but let us not be patient with injustice for too long. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, “There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted”.

Moreover, the argument between faith and works, word and deed, assumes we are all capable and unconstrained. And there will be times when we are not. There will be times when we are weak and vulnerable. We are born weak and vulnerable, like a shipwrecked sailor washed naked onto a foreign shore. Some of us will never grow beyond that, but we are still creatures of worth and dignity. For some of us our greatest work, our greatest gift, may be to accept our own weakness and have faith that those who love us will care for us. Our best work might be to accept the work of others.

I recall that my mother went to considerable effort to persuade me that it was important to accept gifts graciously, and acknowledge the generous intention of the giver, rather than always trying to even things up.

In conclusion, there are some wrestlers who look like they push one another back and forth, but in reality they are circling endlessly, for one upholds the other and neither can stand alone. Work without faith or mindfulness or care can become irrelevant, like giving free Canadian surplus milk to folks who cannot digest milk. Work without some faith might become mere busyness and distraction. And faith without work is but a sounding brass and a hollow emptiness.

Unitarian minister and poet David Rankin put it this way: “Good works are the natural product of a good faith, the evidence of an inner grace that finds completion in social and community involvement.”

I have been so lucky all my life; I have found work that I could do with a whole heart, with joy and love. With rare exception, I have been able to offer my work and gifts in harmony with my ethics and values and hope for a better world. I have had enough that I could share. Not everyone is able to do that, not all the time. Sometimes I have not seen my way clearly; I hope I have learned to see more clearly, over time, and to share my works and faith more fittingly.

May it be so.

And now it is my privilege and very great pleasure to introduce our guest speaker, Susan Coombes, Manager of Human Rights Education and Multiculturalism Fund with the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission.

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