

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
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Faith is a Verb

One conversation that I have enjoyed having with many of you is, what is faith? Many here have grown up with the idea that faith is about believing the right sorts of things. Consider the Nicene Creed from the 4th century We believe in one God, the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God Begotten from the father before all ages, God from God, light from light. Or consider the middle ages formula, that Jesus saved us by dying for our sins. Faith then becomes a test, a set of questions that have only one correct answer and if you have any questions or want these statements translated into our contemporary understanding then some consider you having less faith. For some, this understanding of faith works. For some, it is important that we know who Jesus is and why he is important, but for others it does not. But the truth is that faith, or in the Greek Pistos, is a difficult word to translate. Faith can also be understood in terms of faithfulness and loyalty to God. In the Bible, the faithful are the people who endure persecution for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Or are people who are faithful to the body of Christ, giving mutual aid and care for the needy among us. Christians are faithful to God and faithful to what God is faithful to, which is the whole of creation, thus faithfulness can be understood as love. Love of God and Love of neighbor.

So what is faith? Is it a verb?

This reminds me of when I went to a MC USA convention back in 2017 in Orlando, Florida. I was struck by the slogan of the convention, love is a verb. A reminder of how our Mennonite faith is intertwined with our commitment to service. During the keynote sermon, the late Rachel Held Evans brought up a metaphor about the different denominations of the church being like a family with their own roles to play. The Episcopalians set the table, Baptists are in the kitchen, presbyterians take care of the library, Lutherans liturgy the laundry. And us Anabaptists are out tending the garden. What a fascinating image of the body of Christ, whose distinctive faith styles are not spoken about in creeds or beliefs, but in what they do as part of the body of Christ.

So is faith our task as part of the body of Christ?

So now that I have laid out the patchwork faith in Jesus before you. With a faith based on belief and a faith based on action. Both can be good, but today we are talking about the book of James that emphasizes the action-oriented faith.

The first thing you've got to know about the author of James is that he, she, they, are located in Alexandria, Egypt. Home of the largest population of diaspora (aka international) Jews and deep in GrecoRoman culture. So as we read through James, let us keep the context of being a devout Jew in a different cultural context. The second thing to know about the author of James, is that he has no patience for followers of Jesus who are not putting their money where their mouth is.

In a way, our passage today is quite simple. Listen up, if you're not caring for the orphans and widows in their distress, then you are really kidding yourself. Because being a follower of Christ makes no sense outside of the context of loving your neighbor.

So is faith, love of neighbor?

But you know I don't like sticking to the surface. Let's dive deeper. In Alexandria, there was always the threat that Jewish Christians would absorb things from the wider culture. Now, to us, there are plenty of things we have absorbed from culture, which are harmless. For instance, our Christmas tree comes from the cultures of northern Europe who celebrated dark northern mid-winter with evergreen branches, wreaths, and trees. However, I think a few Mennonites would recoil from our culture's reliance on guns and caring for yourself instead of the whole community. So what about GrecoRoman culture is James worried will stain the Christ following Jewish community in Alexandria? Earlier the author of James writes, Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low. And in chapter two it reads, For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

This is why I think the book of James is worried about Christ-followers treating the wealthy with more concern, whereas the Law says to care for the orphans and widows in their distress. This is part of why the kingdom of God is so often called an upside down kingdom, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The whole point is how we treat people should be reversed, with our first concern for the marginalized in our midst. Or to put it another way, in Alexandria (and now in our time), society has made certain people second-class citizens, but the kingdom of God makes no distinction because all are beloved of God.

And this idea of not getting "stained" by the world is rooted in faithfulness. Faithfulness to God and loving what God loves.

I consider this to be VERY good news. Because if I left you all with the statement, oh hey, remember that being Christian means you gotta actually do good things, then what do you do with that? I know I've heard that my whole life and while I love general kindness, it is such a

comfort to remember what the perfect law of God is actually leading us toward something. It is leading us to an active faith. A faith where we treat people, not just equally, but with a special concern for the orphans and widows in our midsts.

Which of course leads us to the question. Soooooooo who are these orphans and widows we are supposed to take care of?

I think the first thing is to remember that loving our neighbors can be scandalous. Jesus loved sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. Calling them his family and associating with them despite the loud objections of religious leaders of the time. That the whole story of the prodigal son, reminds us that we all have a little bit of that older brother in us, who asks why throw a party for those people, when we've been faithful and working hard this whole time? Which is all to say, that learning to really love our neighbors means offering unearned grace to people we think do not deserve our concern.

Consider the homeless. Throughout the year I've been here, we've unknowingly hosted a few homeless people, we know their travels by abandoned bedding and unscrewed light bulbs. And while we probably do not have the facilities to truly host them, I still want to invite you all to think creatively, about how we can be involved in this ministry, by helping others who are already doing the hard work. By joining in what the later service was already doing, handing out food and coffee before the pandemic. How do we be good neighbors?

Consider the LGBTQ community. A community whose diversity is clear in that I had to say five letters to describe them. How can we be a loving neighbor to them? A few weeks ago I got a message online where someone told me how terrible Reedley was for LGBTQ folks, since it was built by catholics and Mennonites. How can we be a force for good? Through the wonderful conversations at the peace center? In our daily lives as we meet people at work or out on the town? Through supporting our family members who are LGBTQ? How do we be good neighbors?

Consider our later service, who have confided in me that sometimes they feel like second-class members here at this church. How can we be loving neighbors to them? How can we out stretch our arms to them in how we join in their celebrations?

I'm sure I could go on for hours about all the different groups, but those are three examples that keep getting brought up by all of you. I have no answers, but I am looking forward to your discernment about how we can have a living faith that is a verb.