

Faith in Action

James 2:14-26

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

January 20, 2019/ 2nd Sunday After the Epiphany

Today is the first Sunday of our 2019 Faith Questions series.

I received less questions this year than I anticipated—less than last year, certainly. I can only assume that this means that you are such smart and spiritual people, that you have no questions!

In all seriousness, I know not everyone feels comfortable asking questions about faith.

I know that there are always questions that are left unasked. I know that some people are reluctant to give voice to certain things, or they worry about whether or not their question will remain anonymous. And sometimes it's just hard to articulate or even acknowledge some of our questions when it comes to faith.

I started this sermon series last year because I am well aware that very often it is *my* questions that the various texts and seasons of the church year get filtered through and that these may well not be *your* questions.

So, at the very least, I wanted to create a space where the questions of others could be brought out into the light of day and explored.

Having said all this, I did get a *few* questions this year and, as you'll see, they're very interesting ones.

They are also incredibly *different* questions, ranging from church history to biblical transmission to biblical interpretation to the very practical outworking of our faith in our everyday life as a community.

I thought it would be good at the outset of this series to give you a sense of where we are going and when we will be going there.

[PowerPoint outline]

As you can see, the series will be broken up a little. On February 3, Abe Janzen will be here to share about his work at MCC. On February 24 there will be no service here due to our winter retreat in the Crowsnest Pass. We're looking forward to hearing from CMU professor Andrew Dyck that weekend on the theme of "Speaking of Jesus."

So, around those Sundays, I'll be looking at five questions.

Today's faith question is more of a request that we highlight some of the things that are happening among us right now.

The question was, "How are we hope for each other? How is Christ at work through us?"

The questioner was looking for signs of how our faith in Christ makes its way in the ordinary rhythms and routines of life together as a community.

I wanted to start with this one because I think that it is in the "ordinary" that Christ came to us and that Christ comes to us still.

We are still in the shadows of the Christmas season and officially in the season of Epiphany, which celebrates the revelation of Jesus to the Magi and to the non-Jewish world.

As we know, the Epiphany of God was rather more ordinary than many would have expected for the arrival of a king.

A baby-boy born to an unwed teenage girl and an adoptive father in a small-town in tiny corner of the vast Roman Empire... a baby boy born not in a palace but a feed trough... a baby boy that became a refugee almost immediately after his birth due to the murderous insecurities of a powerful ruler who was afraid to lose his throne... a baby boy who ended up having a pretty ordinary childhood in pretty ordinary Nazareth and who didn't get around to doing much that was noteworthy until his thirties...

And then, a young man who was misunderstood and rejected by many... whose followers were mostly from the bottom rungs of society... a young man who was not wealthy or powerful... whose entire life took place in a geographic area no larger than from here to Calgary... and who ultimately ended up being executed by a collusion of religion and empire for being an irritant to both.

All in all, as far as epiphanies from God go, it's pretty... ordinary.

God came to us in ordinary clothes. This is how God comes to us still.

Many people think that faith should be evidenced in the spectacular—in healings and miraculous

manifestations, in wild flights of spiritual ecstasy. Many people chase this kind of faith.

But I think that very often the way of Jesus is most faithfully expressed in everyday actions that make no headlines and draw no attention, in little acts of mercy and kindness, faithfulness and love, that bear steady witness to the way Jesus lived and taught while on earth.

I think James would agree with me.

The book of James has long been a favourite of Mennonites, and this passage in particular resonates with our views about the centrality of service in the path of discipleship.

We like James, even if, like everyone else, his words offer a stark challenge to us!

During the Reformation era, Mennonites were, of course, very critical of those parts of the church that talked a good game when it came to faith but did little to put it into practice. We had little praise for impressive liturgies and ornate cathedrals or even of Luther and Calvin's dense theologies of justification by faith alone when these seemed to come at the expense of obeying the simple teachings of Jesus in life.

"True evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping," Menno Simons famously said.

We know what comes next, right? We sing it in our songs, some of us even grew up with it on the walls of our homes.

It clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad; it binds up what is wounded; it becomes all things to all people.

(Interesting aside: this is the most quoted part of Menno Simons' text, but it leaves an awful lot out. Here's the full passage, which includes:

- It spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love;
- It dies to flesh and blood
- It destroys all lusts and forbidden desires
- It seeks, serves and fears God in its inmost soul
- It serves those that harm it
- It prays for those who persecute it
- It teaches, admonishes and judges us with the Word of the Lord
- It seeks those who are lost

We should probably ponder why we so often leave those parts out in our songs and our wall hangings, but that's probably another sermon for another time!)

The parts of this passage that we *do* tend to quote could have been lifted right out of James 2.

What good is your faith if it doesn't do anything for anyone? What does the word "faith" even mean if all you offer are nice words and prayers, but do nothing to meet people's physical needs? What is faith without action?

James point is not hard to understand, is it? He is critical of the gap that so often exists between our words and our actions.

He knows how easy it is to fill up the air with lofty and exalted words about God and faith and spirituality.

He knows how easy it is for theological types to busy themselves filling endless pages (or blog posts!) with words that explain and categorize the ways of God.

He knows that there is nothing easier than for faith to become an abstraction, a theory that explains what we believe about the beginning and end of the world, the meaning of life, and the nature of God and all the while having *very little effect upon what we do!*

To all of this, James says, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" (Jas. 2:18). He even goes so far as to say, "faith, if not accompanied by action, is dead" (2. 17).

Dead.

Not "inadequate" or "on the right path but falling a bit short" or "lacking" or any other less bracing description.

Nope, James won't have it. Faith without action is dead.

Faith in action was what this week's questioner wanted to hear about. Not official church theology, not a thorough exegesis of this or that passage in the bible.

How is faith in action among us, they wanted to know. What can we point to? What can we bring out into the light to inspire and inform our congregation?

What are the ordinary ways that Christ makes his way among us?

I'm going to get there (I promise). But I hope you'll permit me one more brief detour. This series is about questions of faith, after all, and you may have a question or two about this morning's text.

James says faith is supposed to be expressed in ordinary acts of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Great. Got it.

But the examples of faith in action he actually *uses* later in the passage are a bit puzzling.

The first is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac as an expression of trust and obedience to God. It's a troubling story (Genesis 22, if you want to read it). We cringe at what this experience must have done to the boy Isaac or at the notion that God might command such a thing.

Whatever else this story is, it's not "ordinary." It's truly extraordinary.

And, of course, many believe that the text foreshadows the day when God himself would *not* spare his own son's life.

The other one is also extraordinary. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who *somehow* (who can really say why?? ☺) found two Israelite spies at her door looking for lodging.

These spies, as it happens, represented the nation that was preparing to invade her people.

She agrees to lie about their presence in her home and her city in exchange for their promise to spare her family in the coming war.

So, James' examples are headscratchers, in some ways. A man who was prepared to kill his son for God and a prostitute who lied to save her own skin are perhaps not the most obvious candidates for what "faith in action" ought to look like.

Truth be told, I wish James would have picked other examples. Maybe Boaz offering shelter to the Moabite Ruth, or Elijah miraculously producing bread for a woman and her son in Zarephath.

I don't know why James chose the examples he did. About the only common denominator I could find in both was a willingness to take a risk and act in confidence that God would honour this risk. Perhaps others have a better answer. ☺

At any rate, at long last, I do want to respond to the *actual* question which was not about James or Abraham or Rahab, but about *us*. We, who are a part of this community called Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

What does faith in action look like for us? How is it expressed?

I'm going to run the risk of embarrassing some people, thrusting them into the spotlight. I should say at the outset that my examples are constrained by what I am personally aware of or have heard of. I know that there are probably *numerous* examples out there that I'm not even aware of.

I think of Ernie, offering rides nearly every week to Walter Franz as he continues to go to therapy after his stroke. *What good is it to say, "Well, I hope you get better soon...?"*

I think of people like Bill and Sandra, Frank, Marg, and others who regularly offer rides to church for some of our members who can't drive. *What good is it to say, "You're an important part of our church, if there's no way to get to church?"*

I think of Mary and Elaine hanging out at Denise's house for a few days after her recent knee surgery to help her out.

I think of Carl and Helene who extend themselves in all kinds of ways to help a Syrian family who's renting their house, who have found the transition to Canadian life much more difficult than some others (including the families we sponsored). *What good is it to say, "This is your home and we are your neighbours, if this isn't accompanied by any expressions of help?"*

I think of the many people in our church—too many to name—who volunteer every week at the Thrift store and at the Soup Kitchen. These are two of the ways that we directly respond to James' question, *"What good is it if we do nothing for the needs of those who are hungry and lack clothing?"* Our response, indicated by our actions is, "not much good at all."

I think of those among us—Doug, Marie, Dave, Ruth Bergan Braun when she lived here, and others, no doubt—who have invested significant parts of their lives to the L'Arche community. *What good is it to say, "We value all kinds of people, if we don't attach to this a concern to serve and learn from the weak, the easily ignored, those whose abilities don't fit into our cultural calculus of who matters and who doesn't?"*

I think of Elaine and Linda and Rebecca and Helen and Sandra and others and their ministry of hospitality, organizing coffee and conversation times for some of our older members, for creatively engaging people who have recently had interesting experiences that they might like to share with others.

I think of Bill Wiebe shoveling the sidewalks for his neighbours, sometimes beginning in the obscenely early hours of the morning! I think Bill was happy to see the snow this week—it's been a lean winter!

I think of those who devote countless hours to serve on our various committees, planning worship that is meaningful, tending the business of the church, arranging care for those in need.

I think of those who respond (within minutes, usually!) to emails I send out when someone is in need of assistance. You all know who you are!

I'm running out of time, and I've left so much and so many out. I am sorry for this, truly, because I think that each expression of faith in action is inspiring and instructive in its own way.

There are people visiting the sick and the lonely, making quilts for MCC, praying for those who are grieving and in need, sharing life around tables and coffee, organizing relief sales, giving incredibly to support the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, serving organizations like MEDA and MDS— organizations whose very existence is an expression of the conviction that faith requires action.

I could talk for hours about these things, but you'd probably get embarrassed and bored, and I'd probably get thirsty.

But this is who we are. This is who we aspire to be. We're not perfect, of course. We can do better. *We should* do better. There are undoubtedly needs that fall through the cracks. There are without question times that we drop the ball.

But after being at LMC for nearly eight years, one thing I am absolutely convinced of is that we are a people who believe what James says.

Show me your faith without deeds, and we will show you our faith by what we do.

May God help us to continue to do this. We can't each all do all of these things, but we can all do something.

May God make our lives a reflection of our conviction that faith in Jesus Christ and all he has done for us and the deeds that he commanded and modeled for us are inseparable.

Amen.

