**Faith Without Works is Dead James 2:14-26**

If you’ve ever visited Niagara Falls you know that the sight and sound of it is nothing if not impressive. Even more impressive would be the sight of a tightrope, stretched across the span between the United States and Canada; and a man, dressed in tights, carrying a large balancing pole, and calmly walking the rope.

This stunning feat was first accomplished by a Frenchman named Charles Blondin in June of the year 1859. In fact, “The Great Blondin”, as he was known back then, walked above the Falls several times, back and forth between Canada and the United States, with huge crowds on both sides looking on with shock and awe. Once he crossed in a sack, once on stilts, another time on a bicycle, and once he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet – which he ate accompanied by a bottle of wine!

On July 15 of that year, Blondin again walked across the tightrope to Canada, this time returning while pushing a wheelbarrow. He then stopped and asked for some audience participation. He had proven that he could push the wheelbarrow across; of that, there was no doubt. But now he was asking for a volunteer to get into the wheelbarrow and take a ride across the Falls with him!

He asked his audience, “Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?” “Of course,” the crowd shouted. They had faith that he could do it. But when Blondin then posed the question – “Who will get in the wheelbarrow?” there were no volunteers.

No surprise there.

There are lots of little truisms, expressed in the English language, that summarize the message of the Great Blondin story I just recounted. They are all-too familiar phrases: “talk is cheap; actions speak louder than words; put your money where your mouth is; practice what you preach;” and my newly discovered favorite: “fine words butter no parsnips.”

And after hearing our lesson for today, we can add another truism, from the Letter of James: “faith, without works, is dead.”

The Letter of James is the focus of our newly published devotional book. Five chapters in all, the Letter is relatively brief and can easily be read in one sitting.

For a number of reasons, James is not among the most familiar books contained in the New Testament cannon. During worship, if we are following the conventional pattern of readings for the day, what we call the “revised common lectionary,” we will read from the book of James every three years on consecutive Sundays in the fall and then again, two years later, on the third Sunday in Advent. And on none of those Sundays will we read the passage that is our text for today.

So today, we could say that we are filling in an important gap in our Biblical awareness.

James insists, in the first chapter of his letter, that his readers be not only hearers of the word, but also doers. In this morning’s reading, from the second half of his second chapter, he goes further. Faith alone, he writes, without the deeds of faith – “works,” as we call them – such faith is simply not adequate. It is dead.

Though, as I said a moment ago, it does not show up in the conventional cycle of readings for worship in mainline churches, this section of the Letter of James has received the most critical attention by scholars and commentators over the history of interpretation. This is because, on the surface anyway, its message seems to contradict one of the core principles of our faith.

Most faithful, church-going Moravians are familiar with Paul’s words from his Letter to the Ephesians: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast,” and we recognize this core message as one of the doctrines that define us. Most would agree that it is one of the “essentials” we refer to in our much-beloved and often-quoted motto.

Fortunately, it is possible to reconcile the messages of James and Paul. James agrees, in Chapter 1 verse 21 of his Letter, that faith – or the “implanted word” from God as he describes it – “is able to save your soul.” He is simply declaring, in our text, that in order for that faith to have meaning, the one into whom the word was implanted must not only be a “hearer,” but a “doer” of that word.

James’s position is exactly what Paul expresses in the 5th Chapter of his Letter to the Galatians. “The only thing that counts,” he writes, “is faith working through love.”

So, setting aside the centuries-long debate about Paul vs. James, why is this an important text for us, as 21st Century followers of Jesus? Here’s why: We all agree that faith needs to be demonstrated by actions, but how, exactly, can we be “doers” of the word in our present-day complicated, increasingly polarized world?

During the Pandemic most of us went out and purchased test kits that helped us determine whether the cold or sore throat symptoms we might have experienced were due to COVID or some other, less scary virus. They were really good to have around. A few minutes of home testing and the answer showed up. Either a blue line or a red one. Negative or positive.

Wouldn’t it be nice to have a similar “test kit” to help us determine, whenever a difficult moral question arises, how we should behave so we can be “doers” of the word and not just “hearers?”

The good news is that James actually provides us with just such a “test kit.” It’s a two-part question we can always ask. Whenever we’re faced with a decision – in the home, in the church, in the workplace or in the public square – all we need to do is ask, “what is the loving thing to do?” And then follow that up by asking “will my decision help or hurt the poor, or the weak, or the powerless.”

Complex questions abound: What causes should I stand behind? Where should my charitable gifts be directed? How should I vote on the next referendum or ballot question? Which candidate should I support?

As each one of these difficult questions and more arise, why not first ask “what is the loving thing to do? And will my decision help or hurt the poor?”

If we want our faith to be alive, if we want our actions to speak louder than our words, if we want to consistently practice what we preach, asking that two-part question is a good place to begin.

I mentioned before that I recently discovered a very old truism that nicely points to the wisdom of today’s text. It is “fine words butter no parsnips.” It turns out that this proverbial saying is English and dates from the 16th century. It expresses the notion that fine words count for nothing and that action means more than flattery or promises.

So, I’ll conclude, today, with a brief verse by the 17th Century English poet John Taylor, who incorporates that truism in his poem:

“Words are but wind that do from men proceed;

None but chameleons on bare air can feed;

Great men large hopeful promises may utter;

But words did never fish or parsnips butter.”

I suspect James would agree.