

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Feb 21st 2014

I mentioned to a friend that I had been asked to write a reflection on readings that included James's well-known admonition that "faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead." As a cradle Catholic and advocate of Catholic Social Teaching, I am a big believer in this concept, but I wasn't sure how my Protestant friend would feel. I know that James's contention that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" has sometimes been read as a contradiction of St. Paul's words in Romans and elsewhere that man is justified by faith alone. The debate between faith and works and how they figure in man's quest for salvation has divided many.

My friend and I grappled with this for a time, being very polite and cautious at first, and decided that the two—faith and good works—are both necessary and even complementary. Faith fuels good works. Faith and love in God compels us to be more like God, to reach out to our neighbors, to keep God's commands. Faith without good works can lead to smugness and passivity. Good works are the manifestation of our belief in and love for God. We needn't earn God's love, which is unconditional; we do good because we are inspired by God. Unfortunately, my friend and I didn't have time to go into what moves atheists to do good works. We'll save that for another day!

As an adult, my faith has always been a faith in action. I confess that sometimes I struggle with the idea of really knowing and loving God. When I think of Him as a wise father figure, or beneficent creator, or suffering son, I'm okay, but I realize that ultimately God is a mystery, so beyond our understanding in many ways, a difficult idea to grasp—and love. How much easier it is to love a person, an animal, a place! Loving others (and I'm going to cite the cliché that love is a verb) is the way for me to love God and to live out my faith. It is in the face of others—those who are across the street and across continents, at home and in homeless shelters, in places of worship and in places of imprisonment—that I behold the face of God. This knowledge can invest all that I do with a sense of significance and holiness.

Pope Francis certainly proclaims the importance of good works, action, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* or *The Joy of the Gospel*. He reminds us that we are a missionary Church. He repeatedly urges all of us to "go forth" and live out the message of the Gospel. Our mission can take many forms, but it should always involve doing good works for those who need it most. Francis writes: "An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others" (13). This sentiment ties in neatly with the Gospel reading for today, when Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Let us all go forth in the spirit of love and sacrifice.

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