



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: James 2:14-26

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A Faith that Works

There are a lot of buses parked at the Christianity bus depot. In theory, all the buses are from the same company and follow the same rules: the Ten Commandments, the bible, faith in Jesus Christ. But over the centuries, some buses have become more ornate than others; some drivers have more titles than others; some seats are more padded than others; and once they pull out of the station, sometimes the routes they travel don't seem to go in the same direction at all. I suppose God is still honored by all these different buses. Maybe God takes the long view on things and knows that at the end of the day, at the end of all days, they'll end up parked side by side back at the same depot.

In the passage we heard from the letter of James, two important words in the Christian vocabulary were paired up – faith and works. When we talk about faith and works, we insist they are a natural combo. As the C.S. Lewis quote on the front of the bulletin reminds us, trying to figure out which one takes precedence is like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is more important. The phrase “faith and works” is simply a two-part summary about what we believe: faith, works; Love God, love your neighbor; trust in God with your heart, serve God with your hands. But going back to the bus depot metaphor, some church buses put a lot of emphasis on faith – others drive routes focused on works – and at times it seems like their paths barely cross at all.

All of us need faith. We need faith because we cannot save ourselves. It's like the ending of the gospel lesson Teresa read earlier, when the disciples asked, “Who can be saved?” and Jesus replied, “With mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). But for some evangelical bus drivers, faith is the only thing that matters. As they pull out of the depot, they take a hard right-hand turn and their focus is solely on your personal relationship with God. The hope is that people, one by one, will climb aboard the bus of faith, and in this way God's kingdom will come about one soul at a time.

The trouble with this bus is that it follows a route that can be too self-centered. This focus on individual faith can make Christianity “all about me.” The passengers on this bus say, “Oh Lord, I know that I'm not worthy, but I trust in you; so be with me, God. Be with my church, my family, my people.” Now, to be clear, professing our faith is important. Saying “yes” to God as revealed in Christ is at the heart of our baptism vows, at the center of our communion meals, and there in every prayer of confession. But faith can't only be about nice words and holy sentiments and trying to get others on board the bus.

That's what got James all riled up in his letter. James said, "What good is it, brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? If you say to someone who is naked and hungry, "Go in peace" and yet do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?" Now, to be fair in this sermon, if the evangelical bus takes a hard right turn when it leaves the depot and strongly emphasizes faith, the liberal bus takes a sharp left turn when it leaves the depot and puts its energy into works. Where someone is hungry, they carry bags of groceries. Where someone is naked, they hand out clothing. Where there are people who are homeless, they not only build houses; they also talk about structural racism and redlining and how laws have to be changed to make sure all people have a fair shot at home ownership and getting ahead.

But here's the problem. If the evangelical "faith bus" overly promotes a belief that "it's all about me," the progressive "works bus" can end up preaching "it's all about others." It can become a religion built upon self-denial, a parched spirituality that worries so much about the world that we forget we too are part of God's kingdom. It can promote a works righteousness trusting that the good things we do will get us into heaven, instead of remembering that we are humble children of God saved solely by God's amazing grace.

The evangelical and progressive buses leave the station and head off on their different routes - one stressing faith, one stressing works - yet both want the same things. Both want people to climb aboard and to follow where they lead. It's like the story about two gas company workers who parked their van at one end of the block and began going down the street reading gas meters. At the last house, an elderly woman looked out her kitchen window and watched them read her meter. When they were done, one worker challenged the other to a foot race back to the van. As they raced down the sidewalk, they realized that the woman from the last house was huffing and puffing right behind them. They stopped and asked what was wrong. Gasping for breath, the woman replied, "When I see two men from the gas company running as hard as you two were away from my house, I figured I'd better run too!"

Hebrews 12 says "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." For some Christians, that is about professing our faith in Christ and getting others to profess theirs as well. For other Christians, it is about caring for the needs of the world and inviting others to join us in this work, believing that in doing these works it is as if they were being done to Christ himself. One route focuses on faith - one route focuses on works: two seemingly opposite approaches to Christianity. I'd like to briefly offer two different perspectives on these ideas in the hope that in the end we rediscover a commonality that can unite the church again.

I recently heard of a documentary called "Blink." It is about a Canadian family who discover that three of their children have a rare genetic disorder that will cause them to slowly go blind. The parents make the decision to journey around the world to literally fill their children's brains with images about how beautiful the world actually is. Their

adventure includes going on an African safari, riding in a hot air balloon in South America, and intentionally making friends in other countries. They tried to travel on about \$200 a day so that they could interact with regular folks as much as possible. The movie is full of simple reminders about the wonder of life all around us that we daily overlook – the taste of ice cream, petting someone else’s dog, or not fearing the darkness that follows a beautiful sunset.

To me that’s a metaphor for sharing our faith. What is faith? Faith is not about being told you are spiritually bankrupt, so that you feel compelled to turn to God for help. Faith is not about a lifeline thrown to us in sinking waters to make sure we personally get pulled to safety on the boat of Jesus Christ. It is much more than that. It is a loving parent who wants to fill our hearts, minds, and souls with all richness available to us in this God-blessed life. It is about trusting in God’s plan that stretches back through time, that includes every nation and people here on earth, and that fills us with the resurrection hope that tomorrow, all our tomorrows, can be better than today. Faith is the lifelong adventure of filling the minds of those we love with the wonders of this life and the promise of life to come.

Second perspective: When did human beings truly become civilized? For some scientists, the easy answer is that we became civilized when we learned how to use tools – to sharpen flint into hoes that could till the ground or axes that could defeat our enemies. But the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead argued instead that *homo sapiens* first became civilized about 15,000 years ago, as proven by a skeleton that was unearthed that showed signs of having healed from a broken femur. A broken leg bone can take six weeks or more to heal. Most animals with broken femurs simply die because their companions abandon them. One of the distinctive marks of being human is precisely that we take care of one another in such situations.¹

To me that’s a metaphor for Christian works. What are works? Works are not “to do” lists that fill our days and push us to exhaustion. Works are not checking all the boxes of social justice and doing needed acts of charity. It is much more than that. It is addressing the reasons people get broken legs and providing the resources to fix those broken legs; but it is also seeing those around us as children of God to whom we commit to walk beside for six weeks or however long it takes until things get better. It is an approach to life that remembers we are all interconnected, for at some point all of us break our bones; all of us need help.

James has been read by some in the church as proof that we need to keep riding in the progressive bus, especially when he says, “Faith is brought to completion by our works.” But he too would agree that faith and works belong together. Ultimately, we need a faith that works, in both senses of that word. We need a faith that works, that functions, that inspires and challenges and motivates us to go out into a hurting world with a message of peace. And we need a faith that works, that digs in and gets things done, that commits for

the long-haul until femurs are set, wrongs are righted, and walls of division are torn down for the common good.

For at the end of the day, all the buses eventually find their way back to one depot: Catholics and Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian. Buses from the right and from the left pull back into the same lot of the Lord. Invariably the passengers are amazed at who's disembarking around them – the wide array of doctrines and practices, languages and beliefs. But I believe God takes the long view on these things and, by grace, faith and works do end up side by side after all is said and done. So as the good book reminds us, that which God has joined together let no one separate. Thanks be to God!

¹ David Graeber & David Wengrow, The Dawn of Everything, 2021, p. 529.