

## Dead(ly) Faith

James 2:1-10, (11-13)14-17

A sermon preached by Luke A. Powery in Duke Chapel on September 9, 2012

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Jimmy, excuse me, I mean James, is up to it again. In your face, tell it like it is, no holds barred, *Ultimate Fighting Championship* body slam-like, proclamation. It may not be fire and brimstone, Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But James is throwing punches with his preaching today. "You have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich that oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they?" Come on Jimmy, we're just beginning a new academic year and I haven't even been officially installed. Why are you doing this to me on my first Sunday preaching? Give us, or at least me, a break. James is not trying to win a popularity contest or a presidential election. He's not holding his own Christian convention to sway voters. He's not trying to tickle our ears with savory sayings of the great saints of the church. He knows that he's not in contention for the Dean of Duke Chapel anymore. But Jimmy still wants to get his point across to us. He's seriously concerned about faith, our faith. He thinks it may be on life support, barely breathing, or worse yet, dead. Is your faith in hospice already?

Jimmy thinks that may be the case. He's up to it again. Messing with us when we are really just settling into satisfaction with our sanctified religiosity. Doesn't he have better pastoral skills than that? Doesn't he know we already have a scaffold in this building and stones have fallen and the doors of the church will be closed and we can't take much more than that, right about now? Come on James. We go to the Chapel every Sunday and sing a few hymns and listen to scripture and listen to beautiful organ and choral music. We give money in the offering plate and stand for the gospel reading and we even pay attention to the organ postlude at the end of the service. Why is Jimmy still fooling with my faith? It may be sluggish or a bit slow and not as fervent or fiery as before. But James is still saying that our faith needs a workout. It needs to be worked out. It can't just sit and be a liturgical couch potato or a pew warmer. It can't just worship without any form of social witness in the world.

Jimmy is not talking about having more faith in faith than faith in God. There are ecclesial camps like that but he's not worried about how much faith you have, what you can conjure up with it, whether you can name it and claim it and get it on your terms as an early Christmas present from a Santa Claus God. Jimmy is more concerned with the face of faith, its embodiment. What it looks like in the world and how we treat our neighbor and whether our faith plays favorites or not and makes distinctions between who we serve. Nobody in here does that, I know. But James is preaching to people who show deference to the rich and dismiss the poor. They love the 1% but are apathetic towards the 99%. I know we at Duke Chapel have progressed from the primitive ways of James's audience. They forgot that all people are equal and instead had seating assignments based on status. It might not have been outside or in the balcony or at the back of the bus as during the age of segregation, but it was based on clothing. Some had seats and others had to sit at someone's feet. Misguided and distorted faith. More judgment than mercy. No love of neighbor as yourself unless that neighbor is made in your selfsame image.

Service and ministry based on distinctions. I know some distinctions may be good. Let's be clear. Duke Blue Devil basketball as opposed to North Carolina Tar Heels basketball. I've just been here about 3 ½ weeks and I understand that already. But every now and then it may be good to show some mercy to UNC. I didn't say lose to them but show some mercy by not rubbing it in when they lose. Jimmy wants to destroy the divisions within the faith community. He knows something about town and gown. Durham and Duke. He's trying to break down those distinctions that may divide and he's calling us to such an expression of faith that we realize Duke needs God just as much as Durham. Outreach from the Chapel is needed but so is in-reach from the community. James doesn't want us to be snooty Christians full of judgment armed with a "bible tells me so" kind of theology but empty of the mercy of God, the same mercy that we've received. Jimmy reminds us that in the kingdom of God mercy triumphs over judgment and showing partiality is a sin. Can you believe he still uses that bad s-word—sin? Jimmy is messing with us again.

And it's not just a distorted manifestation of faith that burns his New Testament britches, but it is a faith that is dead. "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and you say to them "go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill" and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" I didn't say it. James did. But isn't he right?

That that would only perpetuate a colonial Christianity and legacy that is satisfied with giving someone a bible and Jesus in exchange for their land from which they get their livelihood, as if it's only about theology and not economy when the gospel has everything to do with the private and public realms. We can't prioritize the spiritual over the physical as if the two are not integrated. James urges us not be so heavenly minded, existing in a cosmic twilight zone, so that we are no earthly good. James wants us to avoid an irrelevant faith—out of touch with the world because it never touches the world, never feels the earth or the flesh of another human being. The materiality of faith is wrapped up in the incarnation in which God embraced the body, the physical realm, to serve and save us. Dead faith is dead because it is not concerned with bodily needs. Dead faith is an overspiritualized Christianity that neglects the fact that the Word became flesh, a body; therefore, the work of Christ through us should be a ministry that takes bodily and physical needs seriously. Dead faith is deadly because it not only reveals our own spiritual death but can lead to the death of others due to the neglect of real human needs. Many times dead faith may lead us to think that all we need to do is to be cozily snuggled up next to a Bible or a prayer book and that in and of itself is the totality of what it means to live out one's faith when in fact it may signify the death of faith. This is a type of spiritual faith that can veer close to bibliolatry or what has been called textocentrism, and values the text, the bible, more than the God of the Bible and the divine call to mission in a world of great need. Valuing words and not concrete deeds.

Jimmy wants us to follow the homily of Baby Suggs, holy, in Toni Morrison's novel, Beloved, and "love the flesh," the body, because faith is about both the spiritual and the physical. Jimmy's faith is embodied, concretized in the world, taking on flesh to feed others, cloth others, befriend others, love others. It works out so that others may not die right along with a dead faith. This kind of faith cannot exist with showing partiality or without works. It can't hide behind Christianese. Right spiritual words but wrong actions. Love Jesus but hate justice. Faith

has to work in the world and be a doer of the word, and not just a hearer, in an indiscriminate manner.

Jimmy has a point, doesn't he? That faith is not about us. It is in fact about the other. Christianity makes us other-wise through faithful works. Works actually keep faith alive. Without them, faith is dead, placed in a spiritual mortuary until it is buried in the crypt of Duke Chapel. Faith with works, faithful works is life for the person of faith and the other receiving the work of mercy. Faith is more than works of piety, but includes works of mercy; John Wesley had it right! Faith is impartial about who receives love. Faith does not declare who is in or out, left or right, red state or blue state, Duke or Harvard. It says like the spiritual "Git on board, there's room for many a mo'", the rich and poor are there, no second class aboard the train, no difference in the fare, git on board, there's a room for many a mo'. I know they don't look like you, act like you, believe like you, vote like you, play like you, dance like you. I know they are not you! But there's room for many a mo'! And everyone, the mo', needs ministry of some kind no matter who they are or where they have come from. Faith sees a need and by God's grace seeks to meet it without a litmus test. "But if you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" In other words, "Houston, we've got a problem" (1974 television film on Apollo 13).

Jimmy is not anti-faith. He just believes that faith has to have feet that move in the world. Feetless faith is like a pregnant elephant giving birth to a stillborn skunk—a grandiose idea that is small and dead on arrival. It goes nowhere and it stinks! Smelly faith. No wonder many people avoid church these days. Faith from the perspective of James has to have flesh on it and embody an incarnational ministry of mercy, just like God.

"Mercy there was great and grace was free, pardon there was multiplied to me, there my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary" (*At Calvary*, lyrics by William Reed Newell). God was impartial toward us. When we were yet sinners Christ died for us so that we might have communion with God. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Instead of judgment we received mercy. Instead of hate, we received love. When we were down, God picked us up. When we were lost, God found us. God didn't give us our walking papers. Rather, God said, "Come unto me, all of you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In other words, "Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God shouldst die for me? 'Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me!" (*And Can it Be that I Should Gain?*, lyrics by Charles Wesley).

A living Christian faith breathes out and bodies forth the mercy of God. A dying and dead faith commits spiritual homicide and strangles mercy to death. Lord have mercy on our faith for the life of the world. "That where there is hatred, we might sow love. Where there is injury, we might sow pardon. Where is doubt, we might sow faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. That we may not seek to be consoled, but console or seek to be loved, but love" (Words derived from the Prayer of St. Francis).

I don't know if Jimmy, I mean James, is finished with us yet. But from the looks of that table of mercy, God will never be finished with us.