

SEPTEMBER 6, 2009

**FAITH THAT MOTIVATES
JAMES 2:1-10, 14-17; MARK 7:24-37**

THERE WAS ONCE A GREAT TIGHTROPE WALKER NAMED BLONDIN. HE CROSSED NIAGARA FALLS SEVERAL TIMES. ONE TIME HE STOPPED AND TURNED TO THE CROWD, WHICH INCLUDED SOME REPORTERS, AND SAID: “HOW MANY BELIEVE I CAN WALK ACROSS THE FALLS PUSHING A WHEELBARROW?” PEOPLE CHEERED LOUDLY—THEY WERE SURE BLONDIN COULD DO IT. THEN HE ASKED: “HOW MANY BELIEVE I CAN PUSH THE WHEELBARROW ACROSS THE TIGHTROPE WITH A MAN SITTING IN IT?” AGAIN, THERE WAS A LOUD, POSITIVE RESPONSE. BLONDIN THEN POINTED TO ONE OF THE MOST ENTHUSIASTIC MEN IN THE AUDIENCE AND SAID, “OKAY, YOU GET IN THE WHEELBARROW.” NEEDLESS TO SAY THE MAN MADE A QUICK EXIT.

THIS STORY DEMONSTRATES THAT THERE CAN BE A GREAT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE FAITH WE SAY WE HAVE AND THE FAITH WE REALLY HAVE. THE LETTER OF JAMES CONTINUES ITS THEME, THE MEASURE OF FAITH IS NOT JUST OUR TALK--BUT IT IS OUR CHRISTIAN WALK. TRUE INNER FAITH PREPARES US TO LIVE OUT THE FAITH, TO DO THE FAITH. AS JAMES PUTS IT, “WHAT GOOD IS IT, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, IF YOU SAY YOU HAVE FAITH BUT DO NOT HAVE WORKS?SO, FAITH BY ITSELF, IF IT HAS NO WORKS, IS DEAD.”

THIS WAS DISTURBING TO THE PREMIER PROTESTANT REFORMER, MARTIN LUTHER. HE CALLED JAMES, THE “GOSPEL OF STRAW” AND WISHED IT WASN’T IN THE BIBLE. LUTHER BASED HIS TEACHING ON HIS GREAT DISCOVERY IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL. THE RALLYING CRY FOR THE REFORMERS WAS “SAVED BY FAITH ALONE, NOT BY WORKS”. LUTHER WAS REACTING TO THE CHURCH OF HIS TIME, WHICH HAD DETERIORATED INTO A PATTERN OF EMPTY RITUALS WITHOUT MUCH SPIRITUAL CONNECTION. FOR EXAMPLE, PAY AN INDULGENCE, AN AMOUNT OF MONEY, AND YOU COULD SAVE A DEAD RELATIVE FROM HELL. LUTHER SAID THAT ONLY GOD’S GRACE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST CAN SAVE. NO HUMAN ACTION OR WORK COULD SAVE A SOUL. GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER ALL.

ON THE SURFACE, JAMES CONTRADICTED THAT BY SAYING WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH AND WORKS. BETTER SAID, GREAT FAITH IS FAITH THAT

MOTIVATES US TO LIVE THE GOSPEL, TO MANIFEST THE SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST IN WHAT WE DO EACH DAY. LET THERE BE LOVING PURPOSE BEHIND WHAT WE DO. LET US SEE THE SACRED MEANING BEHIND USING THE TALENTS AND GIFTS THAT GOD GIVES TO US.

WE KNOW IN OUR TIME THAT THERE NEEDN'T HAVE BEEN A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN FAITH AND GOOD WORKS. LUTHER, FOLLOWING PAUL, WHO FOLLOWED JESUS, LIFTED UP THE IMPORTANCE OF A SPIRIT-FILLED FAITH. IT ANNOYED JESUS THAT RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE CONCENTRATING ALL THE RITUALS AND WERE FORCING THEM ON PEOPLE WITHOUT ANY LOVE OR COMPASSION. THEY WERE WORRIED WHETHER SOMEONE WASHED UP BEFORE DINNER, BUT HAD NO CONCERN IF THEY HAD ANY DINNER. BEING SAVED BY FAITH WAS A REACTION TO RIGID, RELIGIOUS RITUALS THAT HAD NO SPIRIT OR LOVE IN THEM. IT CAN LEAD TO A FAITH THAT IS PURELY JUDGMENTAL, BUT LACKING IN FORGIVENESS.

WHILE PAUL AND LUTHER WERE DEALING WITH EMPTY, JOYLESS RITUALS, JAMES SEEMED TO BE DEALING WITH LAXITY. ALL I HAVE TO DO IS SAY I BELIEVE IN JESUS AND NOT LIVE THAT OR DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. NOTICE THAT JAMES INITIATES THE DISCUSSION OF DEAD FAITH WITH A WORD ON PREJUDICE AND PARTIALITY. IT'S THE OLD SAW. I LOVE JESUS, I LOVE PEOPLE THAT ARE LIKE ME, I PAY EXTREME DEFERENCE TO SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE, BUT DON'T PUT ME NEAR A SMELLY STREET PERSON. A FRIEND OF MINE ONCE PASTORED A CHURCH IN THE CITY. SHE HAD A MEMBER WHO CAME EVERY SUNDAY BUT HAD "TOURETTE'S SYNDROME". THAT IS THAT BRAIN MALFUNCTION WHERE PEOPLE WILL HAVE UNCONTROLLABLE GROANING OR GRUNTING, SOMETIMES THEY SWEAR UNCONTROLABLY. THAT CHURCH HAD TO SWALLOW A HUGE "JESUS LOVE PILL" TO INCLUDE THAT BELIEVER. BUT THEY DID FAITH WITH WORKS.

THIS PASSAGE AND THE ONE IN MARK ABOUT JESUS AND THE WOMAN THAT WAS NOT JEWISH PUSHES US CONCERNING INNER FAITH MOTIVATING US TO LIVE FAITH. THIS IS A TROUBLING PASSAGE. JESUS WAS NOT GOING TO HEAL THAT LADY'S DAUGHTER BECAUSE SHE WAS NOT PART OF HIS FAITH. DID JESUS THINK AT THE BEGINNING THAT HE WAS JUST SAVIOR OF HIS OWN PEOPLE? BUT THAT DAY, THE FAITH OF THE GENTILE WOMAN CAUSED JESUS TO SEE THAT HE WAS PRACTICING A FAITH THAT WAS NOT TRANSLATING INTO HOLY WORKS. JESUS, AT THAT MOMENT, WITH THE ONLY PERSON IN THE BIBLE THAT EVER WON AN ARGUMENT WITH JESUS,

HEALS THE GIRL AND, THEREBY, BECOMES THE SAVIOR OF ALL THE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD.

MY HEAD WAS SPINNING BECAUSE THERE ARE SO MANY AREAS WHERE WE HAVE TO REVIVE DEAD FAITH. THE WOMAN SAYS“EVEN THE DOGS UNDER THE TABLE DESERVE SOME CRUMBS OF HEALING.” I COULD HAVE PREACHED ABOUT MICHAEL VICK AND ANIMAL CRUELTY, WHICH CAN LEAD TO THE PROPER TREATMENT OF ALL CREATION. JAMES SAYS GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY AND JESUS INCLUDES THE GENTILE IN HIS HEALING WORK—I COULD HAVE PREACHED ABOUT RACISM, CLASSISM, ETHNICISM---THE MISTREATMENT OF GAY PEOPLE OR MUSLIMS WHO HAPPEN TO BE AMERICAN CITIZENS, AS AN EXAMPLE.

JESUS GAVE THE WOMAN HEALTH CARE. JAMES WRITES, “ DON’T SAY TO A NEEDY PERSON, “ ‘GO IN PEACE; KEEP WARM, EAT YOUR FILL’ AND YET YOU DO NOT SUPPLY THEIR BODILY NEEDS, WHAT IS THE GOOD OF THAT?” WE COULD HAVE PREACHED ABOUT THE HEALTH CARE CRISIS. I AM THE FIRST TO ADMIT THAT THIS IS A VERY COMPLEX ISSUE AND NEEDS A COMPLICATED, BUT RATIONAL SOLUTION, BUT IN THIS HARSH DEBATE, INCLUDING CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL CHRISTIANS SCREAMING AT EACH OTHER ONCE AGAIN, WE HAVE LOST THE BASICS. THERE ARE PEOPLE, MANY WHO WORK HARD, THAT ARE FINANCIALLY BEING EXCLUDED FROM HEALTH CARE IN THE RICHEST COUNTRY IN THEN WORLD.

YOU SEE IN A WORLD WHERE MANY FOLK SEE FAITH AS SOMETHING THAT SHOULD BE KEPT PERSONAL AND PRIVATE...THE SCRIPTURES KEEP POINTING TO ACTIVE ALIVE FAITH INFORMING OUR EVERY DECISION. OF COURSE, EACH ONE OF US HAS TO WORK THAT OUT IN OUR OWN LIVES. BUT REMEMBER A CHRISTIAN WORK IS NOT BLIND ACTIVITY OR UNLOVING ACTIVITY, IT IS NOT BUSYNESS FOR BUSYNESS SAKE, AND IT IS SOMETHING EVEN GREATER THAN SIMPLY GOOD DEEDS. IT IS A GOOD DEED DONE WITH A CONTINUAL, DEEP FAITH RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS. FAITH MOTIVATES US TO BE GOOD AND DO GOOD. BUT THAT EVEN PALES TO WHAT WE ARE REALLY ABOUT. WE ARE PARTNERS WITH CHRIST IN BRINGING HIS LOVING KINGDOM TO FRUITION ON THIS EARTH.

MARTIN LUTHER KING WROTE IN “LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL”, HUMAN PROGRESS NEVER ROLLS IN ON WHEELS OF INEVITABILITY; IT COMES THROUGH THE TIRELESS EFFORST OF MEN AND WOMEN WILLING TO BE CO-WORKERS WITH GOD.” WHAT A WONDERFUL SENTIMENT FOR

LABOR DAY. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD FAITH. GOOD WORKS WITHOUT FAITH ARE SELF-CENTERED AND NOT CHRIST-CENTERED. MAKING DECISIONS INFORMED BY FAITH, DEDICATING ALL WE DO FAITHFULLY TO CHRIST, FAITHFULLY USING OUR GIFTS FOR GOD....THIS IS A LIVING, MEANINGFUL, PURPOSEFUL FAITH. AMEN.