

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 9, 2018

Text: James 2:1-10; 14-18

Theme: "Token Faith?"

Tokenism, what is that? One example is a company hiring a few different faces to give the impression that it is serious about impartiality. If someone finds he or she has been hired as a token representative of a particular group, that's probably not a good feeling. It could mean that choice has been made more on appearance than merits or abilities.

Token as an adjective can indicate a lack of seriousness or commitment. If one gives token help on a project he may show up to be seen but will make little contribution to the effort. A token offering comes from some slight obligation to participate or to be perceived as a participant but brings miniscule benefit to the cause.

We may say today in our text James touches on the subject of token faith that results in little if any fruit of faith. Such faith can be seen as something to carry around to project as needed, but has negligible effect on one's walk in life. Could it be seen as some sort of Easy Button, token of an easy or at least a blessed end? It results in life that gives lip service, at least occasionally, but looks little different from the life of one without such profession. Can such token faith even be considered as a trinket to be handed in for a blessed eternity, as easy as that?

James does address this issue. It was a problem to those among those Twelve Tribes in Dispersion (1:1). Who would such folks be? The Dispersion can refer to the scattering of the Jews throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia areas after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Or it could be a subset of that group here in James. It may well be

connected to those believers scattered after the persecution that came on the church after the martyrdom of Stephen. They were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1), and some as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19). Initially they were speaking the word of the Gospel only to Jews, but then some begin to speak to the Greeks also (Acts 11:20). James refers to their gathering places as synagogues. It appears the recipients are primarily Jewish believers. Were their lives those transformed by faith or did they exhibit some sort of token faith?

James addresses the issue of seating in this Jewish setting. He says, “Show no (or “stop showing”) partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus (vs 1). ‘Face it, you’ve been looking at faces giving preference to some over others.’ Those well-to-do faces were being treated with honor and those belonging to the poor with dishonor. Maybe there was a token of concern for the poor in the abstract, but when the poor showed up in the flesh, then a shoving of them aside. So were they dotting on the rich and dumping on the poor? ‘What’s up with that?’ James is asking.

James says they were making distinctions, becoming those judging from evil thoughts. He reminds them of God’s often choosing the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom (vs 5). This recalls Jesus’ words in Matthew 6 (19-24). “Are not the rich the ones dragging you into court?” (vs 6) We know some of the Pharisees were quite fond of money. Were the believers James addresses trying to impress some who were entering their synagogues? Were they (such rich) dragging them into court in hopes of getting richer or was it persecution for their faith? James reflects his Brother’s care for the poor. Was there only a token care going on?

At the end part of our text we have the situation of poor, brothers and sisters, in need and the possibility of being served with nice (or even token) words without action.

What kind of faith is it if one of these least of the brothers or sisters of Christ comes in need and is told to be warmed and filled with nothing offered beyond the words to warm them or fill them? Would that be something akin to handing someone in need the easy button and telling them to press it as needed?

How does James words hit us? Have we been guilty of favoring those from whom we may have something to gain over those from whom we do not? Would our faith in Christ appear to be an easy button to carry around with little intersection with our lives? Do we keep it safe in hand, or in reach, or at least somewhere we can get to it to use as needed now even supposing one day it will really come in handy as some sort of eternal subway token to catch that final ride?

We certainly are called to carry one another's burden but that doesn't square so well with the easy. Yes, maybe someone does have daily need, but I need to build up that nest egg. There is a lot of living to do out there, so why should faith get in the way of happiness? CFW Walther, first President of the LCMS, spoke of this subject of token faith (though he didn't use the term) as he addressed the subject of *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. We read, "In the sixth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher describes faith in a manner as if the mere inert acceptance of truths, even while a person is living in mortal sins, renders that person righteous in the sight of God and saves him... [in] Jas. 2, 1 the apostle says: My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, WITH RESPECT OF PERSONS. Preferring the rich, because of their wealth, to the poor means respecting people's person, and that is something which faith will not tolerate.

What about token faith? Have we been guilty? We read in verses 8-10 of our text, "If you really fulfill the royal law... "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law

as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” To this we must plead guilty. If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But do we exhibit a token faith, a faith of words only, little service now, finally just a chip to cash in at the end? I can’t answer that for you and you cannot for me. James makes the tough statement at the end of our text, “What good is it my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (vs 14) Workless faith is worthless faith not because of the value of the works, but from the deadness of the faith—no faith at all!

The solution is an implant, a divine one. “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures....Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” (1:18, 21) This is the word of The Word. In our Gospel lesson we see He speaks and He touches and it happens. The demon is cast out of the daughter of the Syrophenician woman, the ears of the deaf man are opened and his tongue loosed. This is in fulfillment of the words of Isaiah of our OT lesson, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” (Isaiah 35:5, 6)

Such deeds are no problem for the Almighty. Yet He becomes as the blind, the deaf, and the lame for us, that is, He lays aside the use of that power to save us. His life was according to the royal law, completely, totally, perfectly. Yet He dies as a condemned sinner, condemned for our sin. The chastisement that brought us peace was upon Him. There was nothing easy or pretty about it.

We come before Him as shabby, hungry beggars. He cleanses us, covers us over

with the beauty of His righteousness. He fills us with His Spirit. That Spirit give us faith to receive all He has to give. This faith connects us to our risen and ascended Lord, our High Priest at the Father's right hand.

God has promised to bring that implanted word to us in the Gospel, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the sweet words of Absolution. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are a bit like tokens, something you can handle and hold, but it's not tokenism. They convey, bring the reality of the Holy Spirit (baptism), the body and blood given and shed for us. They are free to us but have come at great price to our Lord.

The faith from that implanted word transforms. Faith works! For by grace you have been saved through faith and this not of yourselves, not by works so no man can boast. This faith clings to the promises of Christ receiving the forgiveness that cleanses and the righteousness that covers.

Faith works, receives God's promises, and faith works, produces fruit. Again we hear from CFW Walther, "True, [Luther] did not say that, to be saved, a person must have faith and, in addition to that, good works, or love; but he did teach that those who would be saved must have a faith *that produces love spontaneously and is fruitful in good works*. That does not mean that faith saves on account of love which springs from it, but that the faith which the Holy Spirit creates and which cannot but do good works....It is active in good works because it is genuine faith....The believer engages in good works, not from a sense of duty, in return for the forgiveness of his sins, but chiefly because he cannot help doing them. It is altogether impossible that genuine faith should not break forth from the believer's heart in works of love."

Faith does spring forth in works. Those made sheep in Christ do sheep things. It's more than words, but clothes that cover and food that fills. It is food to those who are

hungry, drink to those who are thirsty, clothes to those without and visiting the sick and in prison. As opportunity arises doing good to all, especially those of the household of faith. Of course it is a struggle, the old nature is always at hand wanting to pull us from such works. The new man longs to do and rejoices in them. There is always ongoing cleansing even as we do the right things for there is always some tainting of that good from the corruption within.

This saving faith does transform. Yes, we fall, no, falling is not our intent, yet it happens. It's not easy. It is hard, very hard, in fact, too hard for us, but not for our faithful Lord. Can you not relate to such a struggle and recount times of failure and success? Have you not seen that faith at work in what you do and in the work of others? Remember the joy that comes with doing the right thing always, but maybe especially when it has been a struggle. It's not the joy of "now I'll be okay, now I'll be saved." That joy of our salvation is not found in what we do, but what our Lord has done for us. No, tis is the joy of serving our neighbor and honoring our Lord., thankful we could be such instruments.

Faith is much more than a token, token faith is dead. It not some curious object on the outside, but that implanted on the inside. We've been born anew, brothers and sisters, into a living hope and for an inheritance that will never spoil, perish, or fade, born anew to service in love now even as we look forward to reigning forever. For Jesus' sake. Amen