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St. Paul's, 9/17/06
James 2:1-5, 8- 10, 14 – 18
Mark: 8:27-38

“Good works are links that form a chain of love.” – Mother Theresa

James said, “ ... I by my works will show you my faith.”

Jesus said, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up my cross and follow me. For those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

“...by my works will show you my faith.”

Lose their life and save it; deny themselves.

Preparing a sermon I like to read the text again and again, over as long a time as possible. Let the text wash over me and ‘live’ with it, letting it inform my day and letting my day inform the readings.

And so, as I did just this, pondering works that show faith, thinking about losing ones life to gain it, I connected two things, a quote and an incident from my time in seminary ...

The quote is from Mother Theresa, someone you will hear me refer to often. She said, “Good works are links that form a chain of love.”

And I recalled an incident, when I was a commuter student and traveled from New Canaan to General Seminary in Manhattan on the 5 or 6 a.m. commuter train. Anyone who has traveled on these trains knows that this is a serious, A-type crowd! The cars are silent except for the shuffling of newspaper pages – the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times. There is always the soft clicking of computer keys. It was a good time to complete my reading for the day.

The commuters would put their coats on and stand as we entered the tunnel and dash from the car as soon as the doors opened, time was critical. If there were any delays in the hour-long ride the cell phones would appear with frantic calls and much grumbling about Metro-North.

One morning the train started to slow; then, it stopped! Stopped in the middle of nowhere! People looked about, tension rose. Then an announcement: “A passenger has been taken ill and has to be taken to a hospital. The train will be returning to the last stop.” But, unlike the usual response to delays there was an absolute, calm, silence! It

was a time of grace. No grumbling. Rather a calm acceptance of the seriousness of the situation, an awareness of another's need.

The commuter's response showed the giving up of self-interest and became faith in action. I think very much the response exemplified the way of living that the readings ask us to model our lives after. Mother Theresa's chain of love. It was a chain that linked and connected individuals together. A chain of love that broke down distance and self-interest.

The Gospel of Mark repeatedly shows Jesus as a "person of action." Mark uses the word "immediately" often. In the Gospel today Jesus calls us to change – to give up self-interest and in doing so to gain our lives, our eternal souls.

The Letter of James may have been written by James the brother of Jesus. Imagine, the brother of Jesus! Matthew lists four brothers, including James and sisters as well. James was the leader and pastor of the Jerusalem church, as the book of Acts makes clear.

The Letter of James was originally a sermon emphasizing moral instruction, providing practical instruction on faith and works. It circulated to churches that were Jewish Christian communities suffering in time of trouble. A well known quote from the letter sums up the teaching of the letter: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (1:22)

The Letter of James has indeed suffered some criticism as being in opposition to Paul's insistence that we find salvation through faith, not through works. A better understanding of it is to see James not as criticizing Paul, but of those who haven't understood that Paul also insisted that faith is expressed in love.

Our faith is expressed in our actions. As with the commuters on the train, our works are much more than what we doing for a living – our works are expressed in the whole of our lives, all our activities and relationships. What we do shows what we believe. A chain of love connecting all actions and words.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, believes that contemplation leads inevitably to action. He founded a center called the Center for Contemplation and Action. Action is the response to the hearing of the still small voice, the hearing of the Holy Spirit within us. Our works are an inevitable expression of our faith. We are called to be links in a chain, to give up our self-interests, to live as Christ did, for others.

In the Gospel today Jesus asks, "Who do they say that I am?" Peter says, "The Messiah." Jesus is the savior, our savior, and the model for our lives. The Church is the body of Christ in the world. We are ALL the Church. We join together in the Eucharist in thanksgiving, believing in Jesus as our Lord and Savior and we express this belief in our actions, in every act of our lives, through works of love. Works that reflect our love of neighbor like the commuters on the train.

In the brief time I have been at St. Paul's I've seen many chains of love. Think of the wonderful, and growing, mountain of backpacks and donated items in the parish hallway. The mountain in the hallway shows how small things joined together create plenty.

There are so many opportunities for good works. Our works need not always be material, money or things. Think of music, art, a smile. A look at the evening news will offer yet more opportunities – local, national, global.

Listen to the still small voice tugging at you!

We are to be the very image of Christ in the world. Our good works are to be the expression of our faith in Jesus, the links of love. AMEN