

A Sermon by the Reverend Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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I'm back! Did you miss me? So... what did I miss while I was gone?

It is definitely good to be back, although I must admit I feel like a kid at the end of summer vacation. I didn't want to go back to school.

I am thankful for having the opportunity to take the time off. I tried to make the most of it. As you all know the main point of my sabbatical was to rest and get renewed, just as the Biblical concept of sabbath would dictate. So, in keeping with the Biblical concept, I tried to keep the time holy. In addition to taking time to relax, I worshiped in many different contexts, visiting a total of seven different cathedrals, including our own National Cathedral. I spent a week with the brothers at St. Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers, Michigan, an Episcopal Benedictine monastery. There was ample time for prayer, reading, and reflective writing.

Now, don't get the idea that I spent the last three months doing nothing but praying. That would make me very holy indeed, wouldn't it? Sorry, but I'm just not that holy. I would love to take the time to share all that I and my family did during my sabbatical time, but I'm afraid this is not the forum for that. We must take some time over the coming weeks to catch up on an individual basis. I will also be considering how to share with you all some of the experiences and insights from our time apart. For now I would just add that a couple highlights of my time include having lots of time to spend with my family, for which I am truly grateful, and taking the two classes at Oxford University. It turned out that I was in Christ Church College.

While I was gone I know that you were not just sitting around. I understand from many that Fr. Tom did a wonderful job this summer. I look forward to hearing from each of you your

experiences and insights as well. We have been apart for a long time, and it will take us some time to get reacquainted. Let's be intentional about doing that. Let's plan to take some time to share with one another the reality of our lives over the past three months.

Now, the last time I stood in this pulpit addressing you it was the feast of Pentecost and we were celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit has inspired the Church from its beginning. It is a guiding force, and often a challenging force. If we are faithful in following where the Holy Spirit leads us we will go to places we probably would not have chosen on our own. We will go into dark places where the love of God can bring light. That is our job as followers of Christ, to bring the light of Christ into the dark places of the world for which our Lord died. This is a scary proposition.

The Letter of James is not a letter without controversy. Martin Luther would have preferred that the letter be removed from the canon of Scripture. He said that the Bible is very much like the manger in which Mary laid her newborn baby. It contains the eternal Word of God. But like the manger, that is not all it contains. In the manger was presumably straw used as bedding for Jesus. Luther referred to the Letter of James as a letter of straw –unnecessary for salvation, and confusing for God's people.

Specifically, Luther didn't like chapter two of the letter, the one from which our reading today is taken. Luther is famous for having latched on to Paul's formula from his letter to the Romans, namely salvation by grace through faith –an assertion that began a little thing known as the reformation. To the question, “Can faith save you?” that James poses, Luther would have answered a resounding, “Yeah... sort of!” Our salvation is the gracious gift of God, but it is through our faith that we avail ourselves of this free gift. In other words, our salvation is not accomplished by our faith. It is accomplished by God, but our faith is the doorway that opens to

us this delightful gift.

Personally, I am not ready to throw James out just yet. I would propose to you another interpretation. “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead,” James proclaims. It seems as though he suggests that works are more important than faith. Or at least he suggests that faith alone isn't enough to do the trick. Works must accompany faith.

Here's how I take that: Faith indeed is a powerful thing. Remember Jesus said that if we had faith even the size of a mustard seed, we could move mountains. If we have faith in God and in Jesus, it will affect us. More, it will transform us. That is what faith does. It transforms the believer. Faith transforms someone who is motivated by material gain into someone who finds value in non-material things, like love, mercy, and kindness. Faith transforms someone who only sees the world from his or her own point of view into someone who is open to God's point of view, that is to say an eternal perspective.

Earlier I mentioned the Holy Spirit, that guiding and challenging spirit from God. The Holy Spirit is challenging to us precisely because it is transforming us –our lives, our perspectives, our very being. When the Spirit of God is unleashed in that way, there is almost no telling where it will lead you. Because you have opened yourself to God's perspective, you begin to see everyone around you as God sees them. The call to love your neighbor as yourself ceases to be a commandment you struggle to keep, or a nice idea, like a new year's resolution, and it becomes the motivating factor of your life. You can't help it. Faith opens a whole new creation to the believer. It makes us question our opinions on everything. It makes it impossible to see another human being simply as that guy over there, or as that poor person over there, or as that person over there who is different from me. You begin to see *that* person as a person. You begin to see him as a child of God.

Now, when that happens, look out. You won't be able to stop yourself. You will want for that other child of God everything you ever wanted for yourself. And if you find that the structures of society prevent that other child of God from receiving the good things you would want for yourself, or for anyone you love, you will find yourself fighting to change the way things are. Works. I think that is what James' point is. Works of mercy are the natural fruit of a genuine faith in the Lord who loved you enough to die for you. It is significant that James' discussion of works takes place in the context of his discussion about acts of favoritism. He challenges his readers on how they treat the rich and the poor among them. Do they play favorites, paying more attention to the one in fine clothes? Do they treat the poor person with disdain? The question is really, has your faith transformed you enough to make injustice and inequality intolerable to you? The question is not: which is more important faith or works? Nor is it a recipe: take one part faith and add two parts works. It is rather that faith puts us on a road, a road we must constantly choose to follow. That road will naturally lead us to an active love for God and every one of God's creatures.

This Holy Spirit is a dangerous thing. It frees us from the Law of obligation, but makes us servants under the "law of liberty". Freedom can be frightening. Freedom in Christ will challenge you every day of your life. Remember the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses. They longed for the certainty of life in captivity back in Egypt. Freedom was tough. But their faith saw them through, eventually, and they reached the promised land.

As we get re-acquainted after the summer and start the program year off this fall, let's dare to risk following where the Holy Spirit will lead us. Let's go down the road of faith together and discover a new creation.

Amen.