

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those who are panicking:

“Be strong! Don’t fear!

Here’s your God,

coming with vengeance;

with divine retribution

God will come to save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.

⁶Then the lame will leap like the deer,
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.

Waters will spring up in the desert,
and streams in the wilderness.

⁷The burning sand will become a pool,
and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.

James 2:1-10 [11-13] 14-17

My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. ²Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. ³Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, “Here’s an excellent place. Sit here.” But to the poor person you say, “Stand over there”; or, “Here, sit at my feet.” ⁴Wouldn’t you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges?

⁵My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn’t God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn’t God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Don’t the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren’t they the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Aren’t they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism? ⁸You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, *Love your neighbor as yourself.* [\[a\]](#)

⁹But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. ¹⁰Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it. ¹¹The one who said, *Don’t commit adultery*, also said, *Don’t commit murder.* [\[a\]](#) So if you don’t commit adultery but do commit murder, you are a lawbreaker. ¹²In every way, then, speak and act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. ¹³There will be no mercy in judgment for anyone who hasn’t shown mercy. Mercy overrules judgment.

¹⁴My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can’t save anyone, can it? ¹⁵Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. ¹⁶What if one of you said, “Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!”? What good is it if you don’t actually give them what their body needs? ¹⁷In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went into the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn't hide. ²⁵ In fact, a woman whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away. She came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She begged Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He responded, "The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."
²⁸ But she answered, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."
²⁹ "Good answer!" he said. "Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter."
³⁰ When she returned to her house, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Today we're tying up our series, "Postures in the Life of Faith." We've spoken of wisdom, of guidance, and of discernment. We've explored how to acquire wisdom, where to seek guidance, and the nature of discernment within the Christian life.

But here's a question for you: What good is any of that without action? It's here, at this pivotal point of activity, that we turn our attention to today. How wonderful that the lectionary puts before us the words of James, "faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity." Or in a translation more common to longtime Christians, "Faith without works is dead." James is definitely concerned with action.

Yes, here we are in a Lutheran church, a church founded upon the very premise that we are saved by no

merit of our own but only by grace through faith, and this sermon is about works. So let me throw up a key note right here: these sermon assumes salvation. That's right. You're saved, I'm saved, we're saved. This sermon is built upon the premise that God saved us already, by that grace, through the faith of Jesus. This sermon is about *what comes next*, action. As Lutherans, we've got develop a sense of our salvation that doesn't shy away from works, but instead embraces works as a brilliant sign of the vibrant faith that we have in Jesus. We've got to learn to talk about works, about our behavior, about the lives we live and the way that those lives reflect upon the faith we share.

Because here's the thing. If we're serious about taking postures of a life of faith, we must use not only our words, our minds, and our convictions. We must en flesh those words. Our minds must connect with our bodies. We must

act out of our convictions. Postures, after all, are physical, psychological, and spiritual. Faith without works is dead.

That's the beauty of practices like yoga and meditation. Over time, the practitioners of these modalities came to recognize that how we use our body may shape how we use our mind and how we use our mind may shape how we use our bodies. Though sometimes we joke about crosslegged monks closing their eyes and humming, "ommmmmm...", who is truly more in touch with their bodies, their minds, and their spirits than the monastics, the abbas and ammas of faith? Action, how we shape and use our bodies, is an indispensable posture in the life of faith.

In other words, an essential part of the Christian life is the physical practice of our faith. Developing habits consistent with the Gospel. Acting in concert with the life of Jesus. Manifesting our salvation in everyday interactions. To call ourselves Christians is to say that we're saved by the

grace of God in Jesus Christ, **and that we are commissioned by that same God to work in the world.** And through those works we share with everyone physical signs of the grace we've received.

When James says that faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity, this shouldn't really surprise us, or even offend us. It should resonate with us. Many of us have heard or said that *actions speak louder than words*. This makes sense to us because we expect belief and behavior to relate to one another. Said another way, we hate hypocrisy in our culture, where words and actions, where promises and deeds, don't match up. We should fully expect and attempt to make our faith and our works align with one another.

Think about it this way. What good is a word that isn't accomplished, that isn't accompanied or confirmed by a deed? What good are the words, "I love you," if you ignore,

deride, or abuse the person you supposedly love? If you promise to do a favor for someone and then leave the task undone, what meaning do your words have? If you apologize for past actions and then continue to behave in the same way, what sense does the apology make? Nothing.

This story of the Syrophenician woman is all about action, and in particular, about her calling Jesus to act in accordance with his word. She begs of Jesus to heal her daughter, to rid her child of the demon that torments that innocent life. Jesus responds that, "The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." In polite theological language, the gift of deliverance belongs first to Gods' chosen people and not to those outside of the covenant relationship. In more crass, honest language, there's a prejudice in Israel against Gentiles, against outsiders, who aren't deemed worthy for

God's gift, that is, until Jesus comes to town and changes everything. I think that's what Jesus is doing here, not saying that this woman's daughter doesn't deserve healing, but instead mimicking the exclusionary practices that this woman had already experienced all too personally.

At this point in the Gospel, he's just finished the teaching that we heard last week, namely that the things outside of a person cannot defile them, cannot make them unholy, cannot make them unworthy. Despite what the Law of Israel says, no longer do certain foods, or certain clothes, or certain practices, or certain ethnicities keep people out of God's presence. In light of this teaching, where she knows that this means God's grace is open to her, this Syrophenician woman calls Jesus to act upon his word throughout the Gospel. "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In other words, Jesus, your grace is enough, however much you allow us to eat. Just let

us come to the table. If nothing from outside of our bodies defiles us, then what is keeping you from healing my daughter? Nothing should. And nothing does, for Jesus heals her. Jesus acts, having his deed confirm his word that God desires to bring healing and salvation to Jew and Gentile alike.

How often do we feel like this woman? Standing at the feet of Jesus and calling upon God to act in ways consistent with God's own promise? How often have we faced the inconsistent behavior of our friends or family members and called them to act in accordance with the core values they share with us, to live by the moral compass they developed within our own lives?

Here's the most difficult question. How many of our black and brown sisters and brothers look at the promise for equality in our country and in our churches, and still yet experience something less than full and equal citizenship,

full and equal dignity in the application of the law and in the practices of our faith? Today, Bishop Eaton and Bishop Mauney called upon us to participate with denominations all across the country in a time of "Confession, Repentance and Commitment to End Racism." This is one of the most pressing examples of our need not only of wisdom, not only of guidance, not only of discernment, but of action.

The marks of racism still imprint a strong image upon our society. Why? Because, for some reason, we as a society have become satisfied with only a mental assent that racism is a bad thing. But when it comes to actions, we need to be honest. We regularly justify racial prejudice. Our country justifies racially prejudiced actions when, in the name of "safety," we walk across the street to avoid encountering a black man in a hoodie. Our country justifies racially prejudiced actions when, in the name of "heritage," we fly flags that carry the history of enslaving an entire race.

Too many of us have become more concerned about defending these actions, actions that say to our sisters and brothers of color that they're not safe, that they're not valued, that they're more expendable than defensible, that they're more property than person, than actually pursuing an end to the overt and subtle forms of racism that still dehumanize black people. We must stop these actions, and instead pursue that commitment to end racism in an active way.

So let's be clear. There's nothing Christian about racism. There's nothing faithful about prejudice or exclusion or avoiding someone because of the color of their skin or preferring a flag based in hatred over against the safety and integrity of our sisters and brothers of color. We need our actions to match the wisdom that black lives matter just as much as any other life, because God created us all in God's image. We need our actions to match the guidance

that we receive from our bishops, so that we pray **and** work to end the racial prejudice in our culture. We need our actions to match the discernment that we've each done, where we know somewhere in our core that the world is not just, especially for racial minorities, and that, somehow, some way, we must act to change that.

So, today, we focus on confession and repentance of racism, and are sent with a challenge to make changes in our lives that lift up, rather than hold down, the lives of our black sisters and brothers. This is not because they're more important than others, but because for hundreds of years, our culture, our ancestors, and our behaviors have told them they were less important, and they deserve to be reminded of their value in the image of God as children of God. God is calling our generation to be the one that brings that message with words and deeds. We're called to say something that hasn't been said enough, that black lives

matter just as much as all other lives, and we're called to live that way as well. Whatever the color of our skin, wherever we come from, we are first and foremost beloved children of God. There, at our common identity as creations of the One Creator, we find our equality and we find our chance at reconciliation.

When we are willing to act in this call of God, in the responsibility of God, in the image of God, then we may truly see racism give way to a beautiful embrace of all people as God's children, ridding ourselves of prejudiced practices and instead finding active ways to work against the privilege and prejudice that still wounds people across the globe. In the words of James, a living faith is shown by faithful action. And we must admit that the lack of action on our part leads not only to a dying faith, but our inaction and silence endangers the lives of people of color.

The church is dead if we don't live the life of Christ. But, with the Holy Spirit alive in us, we have the power to live that life of Christ and to change the world. In matters of race, we know that going forward things must change. Our behaviors must change. Our structures and systems must change. We must uphold the value of all people, black and brown and white and any race under the sun, for we are all made in the image of the Son.

And if we can change these actions, if we pursue such a massive cultural shift, then how much more can we change our actions in the areas of our personal lives. We know and often speak about the importance of prayer and personal devotions in our lives of faith, but we must act on them, incorporate them into our daily lives, to reap the benefits of faith. We know that growth in our church requires us to take active risks like inviting new people. No one will know about the good work God is doing amongst us if we

don't tell them, and we can't share our faith with the world if we can't speak about it to our friends.

And yet there's countless more opportunities to act in our faith. Something we saw once again this week that broke our collective hearts was the deaths of Syrians fleeing the civil war in their own country. Refugees from across the Middle East and Africa need assistance now, and so we can appeal to our governments to welcome more displaced peoples into our country, as well as commit to helping agencies like Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service with the logistics of the task, including sponsoring families.

This may seem overwhelming. There's a lot to do! But that's the key to our identity as the church. We're freed from working for our salvation! Because Jesus did that, we don't need to earn God's favor. Instead, as the people of God, saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we're called to

action to share that grace of Jesus with all of creation. Action in big ways to end the prejudice faced by our black sisters and brothers. Action in small ways through daily prayer and devotional commitments. Action in developing our community through inviting old friends and new acquaintances to become a part of this community and our work for the Gospel together. Action in protecting the lives of refugees. We're called to a life of action. On the cross and in the resurrection, Jesus acted on our behalf. Now, we're called to act in that resurrection, dying to ourselves and rising in an active life of Christ that sees the God-given integrity of all people. Amen.